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Kol Rinah
Rosh Hashana 5781 Day One

What are your deepest, most real prayers, for this Rosh Hashanah? Find them inside yourself for a moment or two.

When I have been pondering my own prayers over the past days and weeks, one thing I keep coming back to is that I want so many things -- maybe not everything -- but so much, to go back to the way they used to be, just seven months ago. I wonder if your prayers are similar.

I think I can sum up these prayers with three words: *chadeish yameinu k'kedem*. Renew our days as of old.

Never have I wished so much for things to go back to the good old days. Not some fictionalized, idealized version, but I wish we could go back to a time when going to school was normal, when we knew what job security meant, when we knew what it meant to hug someone else not in our family, or even in our family but not in our household. When we could celebrate the High Holidays together, like, TOGETHER! I miss you all deeply. I miss my favorite moment of High Holidays, where we all gather together for the Shofar service, hearing that wakeup call as a community.

I want to dig into this phrase, *chadeish yameinu k'kedem* a little more.

It comes from the very end of the book of Lamentations. This has been a time of lamentations for us, for the more than 200,000 people in America, the almost 1 million around the world, who have died from Covid, the millions who have been thrown out of jobs, into poverty and food insecurity. And so, the words at the end of our own book of Lamentations, which mourns the loss of our people's ability to gather together in our Temple, seems like an appropriate place to look for consolation, hope, and insight now.

Rosh Hashanah, like any birthday, or anniversary, or new year, is a time both for looking backward, and forward. These occasions are opportunities to notice the passage of time, whether gratefully, ruefully, or a little of both. This is the time to look back and see what from the past we want to bring forward into the new year.

Renew our days as of old. Is this a wish to have everything go back to how it was? To use the word *chadeish*, renew, seems to mean to make something new, or renew something--not to recycle, or just return. And *k'kedem* is "like" the days of old. Not exactly like, but like. But when exactly was *kedem*, "the days of old?"

The midrash (Lamentations Rabbah 5:21), the rabbinic interpretations, on this verse offer three different readings of what the days of old might refer to, that I think can speak to us as a society, as individuals, and as a congregation this Rosh Hashanah.

The days of old, explains the midrash, refers to the time of *Adam Ha-Rishon*, the first person, Adam, where the word *kedem* is used when God exiles Adam from the Garden of Eden, and *kedem* seems to describe the location of the garden.

Imagine this. You've been living this innocent life, thinking everything is great. But then, with one bite, you discover there's so much more than you really understood. Do you really

want to go back to the childlike naivete you had, or are the new vistas of the world an irresistible opportunity--both outside the garden and in terms of all the complexity that life has to offer?

Seven months ago, we were not living in the Garden of Eden. But we knew how life operated. Work, school, shul, meetings, job security, going out to eat, simchas, funerals--they were all in-person; you had to be there. But now, we've realized that gathering virtually to meet, mourn and celebrate allows participation from people around the country and the world in ways that can be more convenient, inclusive, affordable and with a smaller carbon footprint. Many of us have learned how to work from home. High quality free or low-cost Jewish educational offerings have proliferated, especially for adults.

I suspect even that mask-wearing when we're either sick or concerned about getting sick may become more normal, even after there's a Covid-19 vaccine.

Over these last months, our nation has taken some important steps towards reckoning with systemic racism, and the Jewish community has begun to better notice Jews of color, but there's so much more work to do. On this, let's be clear, I would not want to return the days of old.

This is all to say that the good old days that we will return to will be infused with the innovations from this time. But from these new old days will be missing hundreds of thousands of lives, millions of jobs, more than 100,000 small businesses.

In leaving Eden, there is so much opportunity, and also real loss. Has this time created opportunity for you? What is it? Has it created loss? What kind?

A second midrashic understanding of *kedem*, of those old days, is as referring to the time of Noah and Abel, when there was not yet idol worship. Idol worship means being confused about what's ultimately important in our lives, worshiping the false, not the true. So *kedem* can mean the time when Noah and Abel, and we too, understood and were focused on what was ultimately important and true in our lives. What are the idols in your life that need smashing, and where do you sense the true and holy that call for your attention?

What are the values that are the most important to you that you could live out more and better? What are the crucial relationships in your life, and are you giving them the attention they need? What do you really regret not doing from this past year? Imagine yourself a year from now--what will you regret not doing this new year?

We've learned so much these past seven months about what we really need--and there is so much that it turns out was not really necessary. And we've also realized what we've deeply missed, and really do need. It's this return to the things that are ultimately important, with no "idol" distractions--for each of us as individuals, that is a renewal of our days.

And finally, I want to say something about Kol Rinah, about this congregation that I am so blessed to serve, and our new home and sanctuary, where I stand today. The third reading of *kedem* refers back to the days of Moses and Solomon, says the midrash. What did Moses and Solomon have in common? They each presided over the creation of sacred space. Moses led the creation of the Mishkan, or tabernacle, the portable temple the Israelites used in their early years. And Solomon led the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. The culmination of each of these building projects was God's presence being manifest in finite, human-made space. These spaces served many purposes, as our new home will.

This space is a place to experience the sacred, to seek God. Like the Mishkan and the Temple, this will be a space for our community--our whole community--to gather and see each other. This will be a house of study, where our traditions and wisdom are cherished, burnished, and taught to generations old and new. And perhaps least important but not insignificant, this synagogue building is already a statement of Jewish presence and pride in the center of our larger community, just as the Tabernacle and the Temple were beautiful places of pride for the Jewish people for centuries.

Each of Kol Rinah's legacy congregations' buildings served these functions too. But Jews don't typically build spaces identical to old ones; the goal has never been to recreate the past, but rather, to build for a new present and for a future. We don't want the same space, but we do want the same feelings--of pride and tradition, community and connection, and inspiration and uplift.

To once again sense God's presence in our sacred space is what it means as a congregation for our days to be renewed, as of old.

Many of us, if we are honest, are sharing our prayers today about how we want things to go back to the way they were. But I want to offer a revised version of our collective prayers for this new year -- one that doesn't diminish the deep feelings of longing for the past -- but that incorporates what we are learning now, and what that can mean for our new year.

May we emerge into a new world grieving for what was lost, and committed to what we have learned.

May each of us keep focused on what we have realized we really need and value, so that a year from now, we will be able to look back proudly at 5781 and say, "I don't regret a moment of how I spent my year."

And may we, Kol Rinah, make this brand new place our new Jewish home, and be able simply to be together, speedily and in our time, as in days of old.

Shana tova umetukah, a good and sweet year.