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Rosh Hashanah Morning/5772

Shanah tovah everyone. It's good to share these sacred days with you. Rosh Hashanah is arguably the most hopeful, most optimistic day in the Jewish calendar. Our tradition calls this day *HaYom harat olam*, the world's birthday. Its message is that the world is reborn again, every year.

Our birthdays are commemorations. And when you hit 50, as I did this past year, I guess you could call them "historical" commemorations. But Rosh Hashanah is different. As our prayer book taught us last night: *For behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth, the past forgotten, never called to mind...before us lies a new day and in the distance a new world, ours to create.*

Ours to create.

Tomorrow morning we will read the Torah's majestic, beautiful story of the world's creation. Its hopeful optimism mirrors the prayer book's words; its conclusion reads: *"And God saw all that He had made, and declared, "henay tov ma'od, behold, it is very good."* It's a text filled with harmony, with light, and with joyful blessing.

And yet we know that the world we greet at the edge of this New Year is a far cry from the paradise in the Torah's account. Each of us comes to this sacred convocation with our own anxieties and challenges, and they can seem daunting, unrelenting and as immovable as mountains. The darkness and divisiveness that blanket God's creation can sometimes make it hard to see the beauty beneath, to resonate with the belief that this world is, in fact, *very good*.

One of the leading teachers of Kabbalah, Rabbi Isaac Luria, lived in Israel's ancient city of S'fat some three thousand five hundred years after the Torah was closed. And Rabbi Luria seemed uncomfortable with the Torah's flowery story of creation. Now, if you know some of the history of S'fat, you can understand why. Think back to the year 1492, the year Columbus left Spain and sailed the ocean blue. That same year, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled all the Jews of Spain, shattering in an instant 500 years of peaceful, productive Spanish Jewish life. Many of those refugees made their way to S'fat, arriving with nothing. And for them, the world was hardly *very good*.

And so Rabbi Luria popularized an alternative to the Torah's creation story, codified in the Zohar, Kabbalah's founding text. It teaches that before God created the world, light

filled the entire universe, and that light was God's very presence. When God determined to create our world, God had to retract, to withdraw some of that light in order to make room for heaven and earth, and for us. So God fashioned special vessels to hold that light. But according to the Zohar, something went tragically wrong. The vessels apparently weren't strong enough to contain the divine light, and so they shattered, sending broken shards throughout the entire universe. Rabbi Luria teaches that those sharp pieces of broken glass remain with us still, all around us.

The imagery is stark and unsettling. Shards of glass everywhere. Imagine a glass pitcher shattering in your home, and you are standing in the middle of all that broken glass, barefoot. What do you do? You stand still, paralyzed, afraid to move. Imagine now being surrounded by broken glass, everywhere you turn. Our tendency would be to recoil, to try to avoid those shards, to turn away and protect ourselves from shedding our own blood. The Bible's account of creation is expansive, open and beautiful. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are told to go out and partake and enjoy. But the Kabbalah's version generates isolation, fear and even pain, and the possibility of injury.

And what of us at the edge of THIS New Year? Do we greet the year 5773 with the Torah's encouraging optimism? Or are we more like the Jews of ancient S'fat, more likely to recoil from the world, to fearfully stand still, praying that the pieces of broken glass all around us won't cut us.

As we greet this New Year, a veil of uncertainty blankets this world. Think of the litany of disappointments we have suffered this past year—in our politics, our cultural life, sports and our economy. There are so many examples; too many to count. So I'll just share a couple that struck me as especially instructive.

Example #1 I hope my daughter Talia grows up to be like Sandra Fluke, a recent law school graduate at Georgetown. You may remember her from her impressive speech at the Democratic convention. This past February Ms. Fluke was invited to testify before a committee in the House of Representatives to discuss women's access to contraception. But the chair of that Committee, Congressman Darryl Issa, refused to allow her to be heard. In fact the only speakers that day were men---before a committee discussing, of all things, women's reproductive rights. She became famous when Rush Limbaugh took to the airwaves and called Ms. Fluke a series of names so vile that I can't repeat them, calling her the equivalent of a prostitute and a sex addict. At the convention she spoke with a passion, clarity and conviction well beyond her years.

And as I watched her, I thought what a gift America is. That a young woman could speak to the nation and teach the nation what she believes. I thought, whatever your position on abortion and contraception, this was a good moment for our country. And as a father myself, I beamed with pride for her father.

The next day, in the Wall Street Journal, prominent national columnist Peggy Noonan called Ms. Fluke a ninny, a narcissist and a fool, on the editorial page of one of the most important papers in the country. My heart sunk. I thought of her father again, as he had to read Noonan's petulant screed. We appropriately decry the corrosive epidemic of bullying in this county. We ask where the nation's children learned to be so nasty to one another. Now we know. All you have to do is turn on the radio, any day between noon and three, or even, occasionally, open the pages of one of the country's papers of record, and you'll see where.

Example #2: We all remember the Tyler Clementi tragedy. After having just arrived at Rutgers for his freshman year, his roommate learned that he was gay and used a webcam to try to spy on Tyler while he was alone in his room with another man, and even sent out twitter messages encouraging others to watch. Tyler jumped off the George Washington Bridge to his death. Now, two years later, the New York Times reports that his mother Jane Clementi has done some soul searching. You see, Tyler came out to his parents just three weeks before he took his own life, and his mother responded ambivalently to her son. She peppered Tyler with questions: "How do you know? Who are you going to talk to? Who are you going to tell?" Mrs. Clementi told the Times reporter that she often heard teachings about homosexuality in her church. Her pastor taught that gay people needed prayer, so they could change. "People talk about coming out of the closet" she said, "its parents coming out of the closet, too, and I wasn't really ready for that."

So what do a young political activist bullied by some of the most powerful voices in the nation, and a scared young man about to reveal his most personal secret to his parents have in common? Each is bloodied by one of Rabbi Luria's threatening and menacing shards. Each vulnerable, each exposed and condemned because of the coarse nastiness slicing through our national discourse.

But Rabbi Luria's teaching doesn't end with the shattering of the vessels. His message is actually quite empowering. He teaches that whenever we, in our own lives, act with compassion, or act for justice; when we extend ourselves to those who need us, we take hold of those shards and restore those vessels to wholeness. And God's hands join ours in partnership and *tikkun*, healing.

Rabbi Luria teaches that when we treat another person with respect; when we refrain from unfair judgment or indifference, nastiness or selfishness. When we have the courage to stand with those who need us, to speak out for the oppressed and marginalized---each individual act of goodness we perform---- has a cosmic effect. Like

a pebble dropped into a calm pond, each act of human decency reverberates throughout the universe, spreading goodness to the four corners.

We here at your temple work hard at drawing those shards together. Sometimes it means political advocacy, as when we took a group of teenagers to Albany this past year to lobby for tough cyberbullying legislation. Sometimes it means opening our doors and our hearts to our neighbors who have been excluded from our sacred community, and were invisible to us. Our new program for kids on the autism spectrum and their families is a good example. I have learned much about this growing population, about how unwelcome they have felt, how generally overwhelmed they are, and I realized that we had provided no way for these children to celebrate the joys of Jewish living with us, to be embraced by a concerned and loving community. We are changing that. Our program is small, but we intend it to grow, ensuring that every child, created in God's very image, is at the heart of us, at the heart of our community.

It also pervades our interfaith work, as when we take our teenagers, and adults, to other communities, so you get to know your Christian and Muslim peers, to be with people at very different places on the socioeconomic ladder. We often go to help. But also to learn. To see that our preconceived notions and judgments about people of color, about the poor, about people of different races can often be ridiculously simplistic and false. We try to teach kids, and to condition ourselves, to be open minded, and kind with each other. To act with some humility; to acknowledge that since we cannot really know the pain another person suffers, we need to respond with more understanding and less judgment.

I cannot imagine Jane Clementi's pain. Losing a child to suicide. And then reliving, over and over, that fateful conversation three weeks before Tyler took his own life. The conversation when Tyler told his parents he was gay. Reliving every word, knowing now that Tyler later texted a friend, "Mom has basically completely rejected me." And then, to reveal it all to a reporter for the New York Times---for us. All the tortured regrets and laments, all the anger----to publically expose herself like that so we might learn from her crushing painful story. So we might think twice about responding to another person's pain and fear with rejection, or labels, or shunning, or prejudice codified in law. So we might stand strong against the political forces that try to demonize and marginalize kids like Tyler, or young women with the courage to speak her mind, or the poor, or young immigrants, or anybody else among God's handiwork.

When the world is dark and the future uncertain as it is today, our first instinct might be to focus only on ourselves, looking suspiciously at others and allowing our paranoia to wrongly twist them into our enemies. Our first instinct might be to give in to the enervating, paralyzing reflex to just shut out the rest of the world. But Rabbi Luria's message to us at the edge of this New Year is that when we consciously open our

hearts, and our minds and our hands, we are actually capable of great compassion, and patience and generosity and kindness. And because acting on THOSE instincts aligns us with God's dreams for us, we grow in strength, a sense of purpose, and joy, repairing those sacred vessels, bringing healing to this sharp-edged, fractured world.