

## **“i love you so much”**

*Erev Rosh haShanah*

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Shanah Tovah, everyone – it is delightful that we are able to greet each other and wish each other a sweet new year this evening as we gather again in this gesture of hope, awareness, and positive expectation. As we are present, we again open our prayer books and our hearts as we move in tandem with our ancestors in this season – as we enter again into the tense household of Abraham and Hagar and Sarah – as we weep with Hannah as she prays in the most holy of spaces, and as we sing along with the prophet Jeremiah as he reassures us that even in the most difficult of circumstances – even in our shortcomings and our flaws -- we are seen, loved, and welcomed here this evening.

As we hold space for those who are not here, we are entering again into an idyll of remembrance and aspiration – where time is expanded and our cares in this world take a back seat to our renewed convictions to start again – to appreciate this moment in our life - - no more and no less, as it occurs -- and as we connect to our ancestors to learn from them as we superimpose our experiences onto theirs – and as we look, for a few precious moments, to quiet our minds and our racing hearts to hear again the still small voice of our essentiality – as we crave with all of our might, just for a moment – that we could possess a heart of wisdom.

As we start this new year, there may be so many things left undone – so many things that perturb us and cause us grief. And we may not yet be ready – or we may be so ready already to cast off what we see as so wretched in this past year, and start anew. And yet, before we enter – before we revive our associations for this season, before we begin to perform our stories, before we sit with our ancestors, and express heartache for who and what has been lost -- let’s take a moment, and as we breath, consider how we are doing, in this moment. So, how are you?

How is our emotional health? Are we sitting here a bit more fragile than before – a bit more guarded, with another year of living and the responsibility of holding the private confidences of others, or the burden of our own secret life that we must maintain? How are we doing physically? Do we know our basic health information and our numbers – our cholesterol, our heart rate, our blood pressure? How is our stress level? Are we eating well – are we currently suffering from addiction or dependence on alcohol, opiates, illicit drugs, or other medications that get us through each day? Is our sleep effected because we are online late at night, or because we are suffering from insomnia? How is our exercise regimen? Are we sitting here now, suffering in silence, hoping to put on a good face – but really, each year falling into another – how did it get to be 5778 already -- and we don’t quite articulate specific goals this time, either – tonight, we are just looking for a bit of inspiration, a little entertainment, and sanction to pass into what is next. Are we yet able to connect these moments now to our spiritual health -- to a practice of prayer, of study, of mediation, and mindfulness?

How can we integrate all of this as we greet the New Year – beyond our appreciation of sweet apples and honey cakes? How can we develop a holistic plan that takes into account the best of who we are, without judgment, and that enables us to live well, even in a climate of uncertainty and in times when we are convinced that we don't exactly know what we are doing?

In these days of Elul Rabbi Swedroe and I have been sharing different character strengths in our community – including a bit of a description, a source from our sacred texts and then practical advice about what to consider about each character strength, and suggestions of how to energize these strengths in our life. We will continue this exploration until Yom Kippur. We have received a lot of positive feedback in these past few weeks – appreciative notes from members of our community who use these daily announcements as meditations for consideration – people who are glad to receive some practical wisdom and suggestion, and people who appreciate the contact, as they see that some of the character strengths resonate powerfully for them.

There are 24 of them – roughly divided into the categories of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence – they are:

WISDOM: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective –

COURAGE: bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest –

HUMANITY: love, kindness, social intelligence –

JUSTICE: teamwork, fairness, leadership –

TEMPERANCE: forgiveness, humility, prudence, contentment –

TRANSCENDENCE: appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality --

This past Saturday evening, we had a spirited conversation as part of our Selichot study about how we see ourselves, how others see us, how we think others see us – and really, how little we are thought of in the first place – and with these character traits, how we can develop a language and a life of flourishing, as we seek alignment or *shleimut*, in our life. As we may know, true change – transformational change -- comes from within, as change ultimately, is our choice.

On Rosh haShanah as the shofar is sounded, we proclaim three times, *hayom harat olam* – today the world stands, as at birth – or as we commonly translate it – today is the birthday of the world. What is old is new again. This phrase is taken from the Book of Jeremiah (20:17), as the prophet writes – *asher lo mot'tani merachem vat'hi li imi, kivri v'rach'mah harat olam* – *because God did not kill me in the womb – so that my mother would have been my grave – and her womb forever pregnant*. This is a disturbing verse, and yet it is the source for what the ancient rabbis choose to imagine is our greatest joy. Past the terror of such an event, our tradition is asking us to consider that our birth is miraculous and that each moment that we have is eternally full – of possibility, of depth, and connection – *hayom harat olam* – today -- as this is the day that we are alive, now – this day is forever pregnant with meaning.

On Rosh haShanah, we move from curses to blessings – even if we are carrying such burden and trepidation, we enter into this space and move from terror to triumph – a place of difficulty, to a time of expressing ourselves with gratitude, connecting our lives now, with a moment of creation – each of us aware that we possess the potential of an entire world.

We have chosen to be here this evening, as a way to break our isolation and to come in from the cold. We learn again to appreciate meticulous honesty – to tell ourselves the truth. We reject amorality – we reject negative dialectics and deconstruction as we open our emotions, our bodies, and our souls to the possibility of what can yet be. We all possess all of these character strengths – and each of us is gifted with specific core signature strengths, that is our footprint as we step in the world. As the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hasidic master, the Sefat Emet teaches -- *each of us contains the form of the entire world – each of us is called a small world, since the whole world is contained within each of us.*

Each of us embodies the resistance and the liberation of *hayom harat olam* – each of us with our own approaches can yet help to determine the stories of our ancestors as we write them again this year – and we can increase the caring of and the healing of our world as we stretch to know ourselves and our potentials, a bit better. And while we greet our Rosh haShanah ancestors again, we stand in uncharted territory – for it is they who are looking to us now for guidance and direction. As we know that we are carrying our tradition forward, we realize that in our community together, we are all a great constellation -- as we orbit each other, and gain our strength and our inspiration in our mutual gravitational pull.

By doing the work of identifying and exercising our signature strengths in a Jewish context, we can increase our resilience, our optimism, our well-being, and our joy. We see that our happiness is not contingent on our external events – we can cultivate an internal ever-replenishing wellspring that sustains our life – and we can see that our life is a calling, beckoning us to turn difficulty into favorable consideration – as we are sustained by constant gratitude, come what may.

So I ask in these days – the Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah – in these 10 Days of Repentance, that we review these 24 character strengths, and in our introspection, we identify our top five – through the material that we are providing, and in the guiding questions that you can answer online from the VIA institute – the group that is doing the research regarding the science of wellbeing – and let us privilege how we are wired as we immerse into this new year – enhancing our life’s meaning in how we express ourselves Jewishly, and how we enhance our personal strength when living each day hurts. Let us ask for help – let us seek to provide help – and let us thrive – we are here, today. Hineinu. And each of us is yearning today for harat olam – the ability to have all of our hopes, dreams, fears, rejections, and aspirations finally burst forth from us, like each of us walking again through the miracle of the split open Red Sea – positioning us in these days of promise and renewal, for redemption and God willing, for relief.

Shanah Tovah u’Metukah  
Ketivah va’Hatimah Tovah