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Rosh Hashanah – 2nd Day

Well, I certainly have a little more breathing room in my robe this year than I did last year at this time. I can hardly believe it but in a week and a half, my daughter, Sadie, is going to be one. I am so amazed when I think of all the things that she's accomplished in this time. She's gone from being swaddled 90% of the time to talking, laughing, crawling, and she should be walking any day now. Sometimes I get nostalgic though and I take out pictures so that I can remember what it was like at the beginning. I know I'm her mom so my opinion is biased, but in most of these photos, she looks so adorable. She's sleeping, she's swinging, she's bonding with family and friends. Looking back I've realized that we may have missed a few shots along the way. We don't have any photos of her waking up in the middle of the night or crying in the car seat until she was red in the face. But let me tell you, I don't need pictures to remind me how challenging it was at first. We didn't know what we were doing.

As first I was convinced that we were the only people who had gone through this. In fact, I remember a night early on, I said to Brad, "Do you think it's this hard for other people?" "Of course it is," he said. "People just don't like to talk about it." But then I signed up for a Mommy and Me class at the temple and I met a wonderful group of moms. And guess what I found out? We were all going through the same things. We didn't know how to get our babies on a sleep schedule or when to feed them or how to calm them down when they were inconsolable. It was then that I realized that we were all adjusting to our new lives and it wasn't easy.

The truth is that new beginnings are hard. It's scary when we find ourselves in unfamiliar situations. We feel vulnerable and unsure of ourselves. I don't think anyone particularly likes those feelings. That's why we usually choose experiences that are in our comfort zone. This way we can feel confident and we won't be putting ourselves at risk for embarrassment or failure. So many people try to stay on a steady path and avoid making any major changes. But when we do this, we limit ourselves from reaching our full potential.

Recently I was sent a powerful piece from the Washington Post, written by a woman who had recently gotten divorced.¹ She said that after almost twenty years, she began to feel like it would be better to be alone than to be in a marriage that wasn't working, that was irrevocably broken. She knew that leaving would be the hardest thing she had ever done. She was so used to being somebody's wife. That was how she defined herself. That was how she knew herself. And now she was going to have to start over. She was going to have to recreate herself. To do that, she said, is "a task only for the very bravest of heart." It is scary and hard. But with courage and a large measure of faith, she was able to begin again. If she hadn't she would have been denying herself the opportunity to grow and figure out who she really was and who she wanted to be.

That is what this holiday of Rosh Hashanah is all about. It encourages us to grow and change and seek new beginnings. Rosh Hashanah is also referred to as Yom Harat HaOlam, meaning the day of the world's birth or creation. We believe that today is the anniversary of the day that the world came into being. However, there is a dispute regarding the timeline of events. One of our sages, Rabbi Eliezer, said that God actually began the work of creation on the 25th day of Elul.² That would mean that the work of creation actually started a week ago. So Rosh Hashanah is not the day that God created the heavens and earth, it is the anniversary of the day that humans came into being. Today is actually the anniversary of our creation.

¹ David Wolpe. "Divorce is a Death." *The Washington Post: On Faith* (online).

² Leviticus Rabbah 29:1.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are given the opportunity to look back and reflect on our lives. We get to consider our actions and the choices we've made. Are we proud of ourselves? Are there things that we would like to change or that we can learn from? But this day doesn't just call upon us to look backwards. It tells us to look towards the future as well. We are to consider the person we've yet to become – the person we have the potential to be. This day gives us the chance to re-envision our lives. We just have to challenge ourselves to do this. And that's the hard part.

Here at the Temple, we have a committee called the Addiction Support Team, which is part of our health and wellness group. It is made up of individuals who themselves have struggled with addiction, or have family members that are addicted or hopefully, are in recovery. Some members don't have personal experience, but are interested in this world so they've gotten involved. Our goal is to provide education and support to the members of our congregation, as well as the community. For the past few years, we have hosted a sober seder. It is similar to other seders but has the spirit of recovery. We compare the exodus from Egypt to one's liberation from drugs and alcohol. Of course, we serve grape juice instead of wine.

Last year, I had the chance to speak to one of the participants after the seder. He was a young man who was living in a halfway house at the time. He said that he had been clean for over six months and the process had been grueling. Of course he had to eliminate drugs and alcohol from his life, but he also had to find a new place to live, get a new job, and he couldn't hang around his old friends anymore since they were a bad influence. In some ways, the same was true of his family. That was the reason that he was at the sober seder. He wasn't going to be able to go to his family's Passover celebration because as he put it, "they really liked to take advantage of the four cups of wine." It would be too tempting to be around that. So he was leaving behind everyone and everything from his former life. It was going to be hard but he knew nothing good was going to happen if he stayed on the path that he was on. So he decided to start over. This took an unbelievable amount of courage. Where did this come from? I think he knew that if he didn't start over, he would probably be dead. By choosing a new beginning, he was choosing life.

On Yom Kippur, we will read the powerful words in which God tells us that we are being given this exact choice. We can choose life and blessing or death and curse.³ Every time we start over or choose a new path for ourselves, we are choosing life. We know it is not going to be easy but must try to find the courage to go forward because we know that there are blessings to be found. At the beginning, we may not always know what they are, but we have to have hope that they are there.

But it takes such strength to begin anew. Where can we possibly find the courage to begin again? I think the answer can be found in the Book of Exodus. When God brings the Israelites out of Egypt, there are many who complain about their new conditions. They think it was hard wandering through the wilderness. They say it would have been better if we had just stayed in Egypt. They are so used to being slaves and following the same routine every day, that this new way is jarring for them. At one point, even Moses questions the journey. He wonders how he can lead these people through this tough transition. It is then that God says, "I will go in the lead and lighten your burden."⁴ God does exactly this, staying with the people and leading them to the Promised Land. This reminds us that God is with us too, strengthening and guiding us through our wilderness and leading us to a new place

For many of us, the past year has been filled with many new beginnings. But many of them were ones we did not expect or want. We know many people who have lost their jobs and have been forced to move and take jobs with lower incomes and less prestige. Then there are individuals in our congregation who were diagnosed with serious illnesses. Now their days are busy with doctor's visits and body scans, rather than the activities that the once loved to do. And of course, there has been loss. Some amongst us have lost parents, and spouses, and even children.

³ Deuteronomy 30.

⁴ Exodus 33:23.

These circumstances are painful and difficult and they have changed our lives. In many ways it feels like we have been forced to start over. It wasn't our decision to recreate ourselves. In these cases, what are our options? We could try to resist the change and cling to the life that we had before. But then we'd be living in denial and eventually we're going to have to give in and accept that our lives have changed. Though it is difficult, we should try to embrace our new beginning because even in these cases, we may find that there are blessings. Even when we least expect them.

In the book, Man's Search for Meaning, Dr. Viktor Frankl shares his experience as a prisoner in four concentration camps. Despite the incredible odds, he lived to see the liberation. He remembers the first time he realized he was truly free. He was walking alone in the countryside and there wasn't a person within miles of him. Of that moment he says, "I [knew] that on that day, in that hour, my new life started."⁵ He was no longer the same person that he was before. How could he be? He had seen too much. And having lost his wife, his mother, his father, and his brother, he had certainly lost too much. So he was forced to begin again. He would have to create a new life for himself.

But where did he find the courage to go on? In his case, there were two things that kept him going. It was the responsibility that he felt towards his wife. He knew that he would have to go on to keep her memory alive. But it was also his hope for the future. He didn't know what it was going to be like, but he had to believe that there was a reason he was still alive – that there was a reason for him to keep living. Turns out there was. He would eventually get re-married and have a child. Then he would write Man's Search for Meaning, one of the most insightful books that came out of the Holocaust. This book has had such an unbelievable influence on individuals around the world and I think it is because his message is so universal. Frankl says that no matter how hard life is or how challenging the circumstances may be, we can endure it. We just have to find something in the experience that will keep us going. We have to find something that will give us the strength to begin again.

This makes me think of conversation that I recently had. I was speaking to a man whose wife died a few years ago. They had been married for sixty-one years and when he lost her, he wasn't sure how he was going to be able to go on. They had done everything together. They were really partners in life. Now that she was gone, he didn't know how he was even going to do his laundry, let alone take care of himself. He hadn't been alone since he was in his twenties. But he knew that his wife would want him to be strong and would want him to be there for their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This was what gave him the courage to keep going. So he learned to take care of himself and began to create a new life for himself – as a "bachelor" as he called it.

And then, a year later, he met a woman in his community who was also a widow. They got to know each other and found that they had so much in common. Their pasts were similar. They both had long, loving marriages to wonderful spouses. But soon they found that they had similar goals and ideas for their future. Had you asked either one of them if they would have thought they'd ever be happy again, they both would have told you it wasn't possible. There is no way that they could foresee that their path would take them in this direction. Out of their new beginning was born new love and companionship.

We must learn to embrace our new beginnings whether we think we are choosing them or they are choosing us. We never know for certain how our lives will unfold, but we have to have hope in the future. We have to believe that in every situation, there is potential. There is the possibility to grow and change and become the best version of ourselves. In this coming year, may we all find the courage to begin again. For when we are able to do this, I believe that we too will be led to a Promised Land - to a life filled with blessings. Ken Yehi Ratzon.

⁵ Viktor Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Pocket Books, 1997.