

L'Shanah Tovah

Welcome to 5777. Don't forget to write 5777 on all your bank checks as we enter into this new year. Just seems like yesterday that we were writing 5776 on everything. In the year 3831 the Jewish people never thought we'd celebrate Rosh Hashanah again let alone tonight 1,946 years later as we sit here celebrating our Judaism and our community. In 3831 the Great Temple had just been destroyed by the Romans, Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai escaped and was allowed to gather his students in Yavneh to continue being one of the greatest rabbinic teachers of his time and throughout history. For those of you keeping score at home 3831 was the year 70 in Common Era numbers. For those of you who think I'm talking about baseball, Rabbi Zakai's lifetime ERA was a respectable 2.72 and the Jerusalem Templars considered signing him as their starting pitcher before his mother forced him to be a teacher and get a respectable job. For those of you who thought there would be no math or History portion on the test tonight, guess again. For those of you who are lost and thought this was a special 7:30 screening of Bridget Jones' Baby, I have bad news for you.

Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai is singlehandedly thought to be the person who saved Judaism and set the foundation for rabbinic Judaism as

we know it. No one thought the Jewish people could survive without the Temple or the High Priests. And yet, as we've been taught to do, each year we read the Torah that our rabbis, teachers, and parents have passed down for generations to us. We study the writings and history that have kept us together as a people, as a religion and as a culture for thousands of years. We read about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and about the mishugas of Jacob who somehow thought it would be a good idea to marry two sisters.

And yet without Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and their two hand maidens, Zilpah and Bilhah, we wouldn't have the Twelve Tribes of Israel and their daughter Dinah. Without them none of us would be sitting here connected by history, religious background and Jewish culture. Something in what Abraham taught Isaac, in what Isaac taught Jacob and what your parents taught you has us all sitting here praying as a community, as a family and looking inward as we continue to try and figure out who we are as individuals, who we are as a community and what our Judaism means to us. In our silent meditations, in our hearts, we all ponder how we want to live our lives in this new Jewish year and how we want to make the world a better place to live in.

The majority of stories in the Torah are filled with dysfunctionality. Dysfunctional families, dysfunctional heroes, rulers filled with hubris who tear down the entire Egyptian Empire, children filled with greed and malice, parents filled with ignorance and envy. And yet despite all of their frailty, they pass down a message and a set of values that persist in our lives to this day. Adam and Eve couldn't even teach their children how to love and respect each other and Cain kills Abel. We know we can do better.

Noah is a drunkard, the best of the worst generation, pushed to the brink by his ordeal before and during the flood. As soon as he empties the ark and sits on dry land he gets his drunk on until he passes out and banishes his son Ham the next day for witnessing his debauchery. We can do better than that.

Abraham banishes his first son, casting out Ishmael and Hagar at Sarah and God's request. He is later told by God to take Isaac up on a mountain to be sacrificed in God's name and Abraham complies without a word of reproach. We hope never to be asked to do that.

Jacob is such a poor father that his own sons throw his favorite son, Joseph, into a pit while arguing about whether to kill him or not. They eventually sell him into slavery and the story is so compelling that Andrew

Lloyd Webber still has us singing about it to this day. It is only a good story because we like the ending and we know where it is going. But when his brothers wanted to kill him, no one knew what the future would hold for any of them and Jacob mourned Joseph's death for twenty years before he is reunited with his beloved son who saves all of them and the history of the entire Jewish people.

In this life we all struggle to be ourselves but often it is so hard to even know who we are some days. We add complex layers daily and too often compare our identity with the identities of our friends, our family, our ancestors. We are exposed to so many personality types and archetypes of the people who surround us every day as well as those people we've studied throughout history.

As Jews we also view parts of our lives through the lens of Torah while doing our best to live in a Christian nation surrounded by a large Muslim world just trying to survive as American Jews. Questions swirl around in our heads. Do we live in the Garden of Eden or a life outside the walls always trying to get back in? Is there a heaven or hell? Is heaven the life we live, surrounded by such amazing families and friends, our lives overflowing with blessings? Or do we feel as if we live a daily life in hell,

struggling with our spouses, family, children, work, keeping up, falling down, fighting illnesses, addictions, grief, loss, fear and anxiety? Or is it a combination of both? Some days good, some days bad, sometimes really good and sometimes really bad?

Do we feel like Abraham, walking up that mountain, Isaac trailing behind him asking so many questions? Are we there yet? Why do I have to carry the wood? Why do I have to carry this knife? Why did we even bring the donkey if you're just gonna make me carry all this stuff? And his most important observation - Where is our sacrifice?

Where was Abraham in his thoughts? What was he thinking? Was he thinking anything? Did he know Isaac would be fine? Was Abraham testing God more than God was testing Abraham? How did this man feel in his old age, walking up the mountain with his most beloved son, Isaac, dedicated his whole life to this God who now commanded him to sacrifice his precious child? How did he feel? Where were his thoughts? Where would your thoughts have been?

Do we feel like Sarah, a life spent wanting children only to watch all those around her achieve what her infertility wouldn't allow her to achieve? Do we feel like Sarah who is kept in the dark and doesn't know everything

that Abraham is thinking, who wakes up to find her two most beloved people gone before dawn without a word or a note to ease her fears? According to the Torah Sarah, Abraham and Isaac never see each other alive again. Upon their return from the ordeal Sarah has died while they were gone and they must arrange her burial. Does she die of a broken heart because she knows what Abraham might do or because she doesn't know what is going on?

Do we feel like Isaac, young and trusting, full of questions and curiosity, full of enough wisdom to know that his father seems different and that this day doesn't feel like any other day? Do you feel like Isaac or the sacrificial lamb? This is where that phrase comes from. Do we have such trust within us like Isaac who allows Abraham to truss him up, place him upon the altar and lift that sacrificial blade over his body? Could we have looked our own father in the eye and watched him struggle with God and had as much faith and trust as both Abraham and Isaac had in that moment? As generations who have grown up in the shadow of the Holocaust have we ever had as much faith in God ever? As Jews who study history, study all the terrible things the world has done to us in an attempt to wipe us out once and for all where is our faith? Is God in the fact

that we somehow survive time and time again? Or is God eternally turned away from us, allowing the destruction of 6 million Jews after a seemingly endless history of ignorance and anti-Semitism and senseless destruction? Or is it both, God is present to save some and yet not present enough to end thousands of years of baseless hatred and war through all cultures and all of humanity.

Who are you on this Rosh Hashanah in this moment? Who do you relate with in Torah, feel like, understand? Abraham, Isaac or Jacob? Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel or Leah? Joshua, King Saul, King David, King Solomon, Bathsheba, Deborah, Queen Esther, Ruth or Naomi? Do you feel like Jonah in the Whale or like Job, clinging onto your faith after you have lost it all? How have you been tested this past year? Where have you risen to the challenge? Where have you failed? What have you learned? What changes have you made for the better? What peace have you found in your life, in your love, in your family, in your heart? Each year being tested forces us to use our strengths and know ourselves. Each year we rise to challenges and new heights as often as we fail in certain moments. Who of us can say we have not tasted the bitterness of defeat? We all hope we learn from our mistakes and yet often we find ourselves making those

same mistakes all over again just to learn new lessons. We've all made changes to better our lives and yet too often only look at the changes we've yet to make rather than appreciating our accomplishments and blessings. Peace? Peace seems like a distant dream or a fairy tale we read about in a book with wizards and dragons. Finding peace in our lives, in our work, in our community and in our world seems like the unattainable challenge we are ever trying to achieve. If we are lucky we create peace in our lives, in our love, in our family and in our hearts.

Our Judaism, our community, our culture has survived because we cling to it, we find value in it, we turn it over in our lives every week and try to figure out our Jewish identity in the midst of living a Jewish life on our individual terms. This year I ask you to think about your Jewish identity and what you want to add to it. Come celebrate Shabbat with us when you need that beautiful extra something to complete your week. Find a Jewish book or two that you've always wanted to read and read about history, our ancestors or about a Jewish life similar or different from your own. If you don't have a favorite Jewish organization you are part of find one, and discover its meaning and purpose. Go to a Jewish festival or see a Jewish

film to remind you how good we have it in our Jewish lives in 5777 as American Jews and Jewish Americans.

All of our ancestors struggled for thousands of years so that we could struggle less. They struggled with every human flaw we still struggle with today and they didn't even have Facebook or Instagram to distract them or tell anyone about it. Our struggle is far from over, but we live in a time where we have more freedom and more understanding of how to make our lives better and the tools to begin the work.

The lessons and stories in the Torah are here to make us better and help us avoid making the same mistakes they made. Don't allow your children to be jealous of each other, only drink in moderation, don't pick favorites, maintain peace in your home and with family, communicate with each other with kindness and respect. Be nice. Be respectful. Don't take it personally. Do your best.

As we begin this year of 5777 together, I pray that you look inward and outward and count your blessings each day. I pray that your love and gratitude for your life overflows to all those in your life. I pray that we are all written for a good year of health, family and friendship. I pray that you remember all the goodness you bring into the world and how many people

love you for being yourself and sharing that with them. God never expects us to be like Moses, Abraham or any of our ancestors. God only wishes that we shine as our best selves and love who we are inside and out.

I wish you all a happy and healthy new year.

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