

Erev Tov/Good evening. During Rosh Hashanah, we are to look back at the last year and marvel at the passage of time. What dreams and hopes did we have last Rosh Hashanah? What goals did we set for ourselves? Did we fulfil them? How did COVID -19 and all its many side effects, turn our lives on their heads? What a year 2019/2020 has been.

In my own life, I cannot help but think that it was only 11 months ago when I gave Alan Pomerantz and Eileen Singleton a letter, informing them that I would be leaving CJC at the end of June 2021. At the time, I began to imagine what this last year would be like; this would be my last time leading services at Wilde Lake looking around the room, knowing where many of you sit, remembering the assigned seats which are no longer filled and noticing the new people developing new seating habits. I imagined the different events throughout the year that would help us highlight important benchmarks in our relationship. I would spend my time wrapping up different projects, cleaning out my files, creating a binder of best practices for the new rabbi to use or discard as he/she wished. My sermons this HHD were going to revolve around the ten most important lessons I learned at CJC. It was so vivid in my imagination. I had a plan. I knew that CJC would want to edit my plan. But I was pretty confident that my plan was a good one, allowing you and me to say goodbye to each other in as healthy and constructive way as possible.

After talking to so many of you, I know you too had plans: bar/bat mitzvahs, graduation plans (HS and college), weddings, baby naming, job promotions, once in a lifetime vacations, family reunions, and/or get a ways with friends - so many things to look forward to that give life meaning and purpose.

And then March 30, 2020 threw us against our will, kicking and screaming into covidville a scary version of Oz. Only this time, no matter how many times we clicked our heels, we just could not seem to get home. Life changed.

Instead of at Wilde Lake today I am at OMI. I am looking at a room in which I am grateful to see barely ten people, grateful that all of you are wearing masks. And yet because you are wearing a mask, I can barely see your eyes, never mind read your expressions. Nor can I hear you because these masks muffle our voices. For that matter, I am convinced they block my hearing. I have been told that there are hundreds of people whom I cannot see or hear celebrating Rosh Hashanah with us. How will I know how I am doing if I do not hear you cough or laugh? Will we be zoom-bombed or will I go into slow motion for a moment because someone's connection is unstable, truly redefining the pain a dropped call can cause.

After Passover all the side effects of this pandemic started to rise to our consciousness: unemployment, depression, anxiety, suicide, isolation, fear. How were we to create a community that supports all of us when we could not even come together? How was I to support, lead a community, when I was technologically behind the curve and clearly untrained for this new reality? Questions upon questions abounded and still do. The most elusive one being, when will this pandemic end? And what will the new normal be like when it does?

As if all of that were not enough, May 25, 2020 reinvigorated a movement that to this day will not be quieted. George Floyd's death became the straw that broke the camel's back, demanding that our whole country truly confront our individual and our collective racism. There are very few 6 month periods in my life that have transformed our lives nearly as much as this last 6 months have.

Every Rosh Hashanah, I rise in front of you and every other congregation that has given me the privilege of co-leading during the High Holy Days and describe the gift that Rosh Hashanah is: A time to focus on gratitude; to focus on the good in our lives; to celebrate that we are here this year. What does gratitude even mean during a year like 2020? For the reality is that close to 200,000 people in the US have died due to this virus. 3.6 times as many African Americans than Caucasian Americans have died

from COVID-19. More than 41 million people have filed for unemployment during COVID-19. Too many African Americans have been racially profiled, assaulted or killed by law enforcement this last year. So let me ask again, what does gratitude mean in a year like this?

Gratitude is acknowledging the people who make our lives more meaningful, more sacred, like CJC/CJCS's volunteers, lay leaders, and staff, colleagues, spouses, children, parents, siblings, confidants, friends, and, of course, our community. All of us have a part to play in giving our life meaning and helping us find our way back to gratitude. We are not in this alone, nor do we have to figure it all out by ourselves, nor can we. I am quite aware, we all have arrived to tonight on a different path. Some of you lost your jobs, buried loved ones, battle isolation and depression, or are sick with any one of many diseases that co-exist with COVID-19 or have COVID itself. Your list of gratitude might be harder to access, shorter, filled with more pain than gratitude. And there are others, our introverts, who have enjoyed this time to do every project they never seem to get to during pre-pandemic life. There are those who have found a way to be connected while sheltering in place, who feel supported and content. And then there are most of us who waffle back and forth depending on the day or time of day between the need for more and the feelings of contentment for what we currently have.

If we are watching, if we are listening, if we are hearing, if we are participating in High Holy Days, then we are blessed to be here tonight alive. For life is truly a gift that can be taken at any time for any reason, no matter how hard we worked to do everything right to avoid the angel of death.

And as true as my mind knows that to be, my heart, my soul, struggles to find gratitude. How do I say thank you when I do not feel grateful? How do I build a positive foundation of good when I feel the very ground I stand on can be taken away from me at any moment? I feel blessed to have participated with Rabbi Ilyse Kramer, Ilene Toller, Neil Fagan, and Daniel Goldstein in a pre-recorded discussion around trauma and the Torah portion for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the sacrifice of Isaac.

Please go to CJC's website after services during Rosh Hashanah some time and listen to our collective wisdom around trauma. Although tonight's sermon lays the ground work for this important topic, the ideas, and feelings expressed during that pre-recording take our understanding of trauma, gratitude and Rosh Hashanah to a higher level than I could ever do alone.

The rabbis were clear we do not get to gratitude by denying our reality. In fact, the psalms are filled with prayers like Psalm 6: 3-6 "My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Oh Gd, how long? Turn, Gd, and deliver me, save me because of your unfailing love. Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave? I am worn out from my groaning." We get to gratitude by expressing to Gd, yes Gd, and Gd's hands on earth - mental health professionals, our clergy, friends and family - how difficult life truly is for us right now. We transcend our pain by getting professional help, and/or getting the support we need.

Jewish professionals spend so much time wondering why you are here in real life or virtually at this service tonight: guilt, habit, obligation, comfort, spirituality, learning, quiet, Gd, community, children....Do you enjoy the music, prayers, bumping into old friends, connecting with family? Most of these conversations center around what you get out of coming to services; as if prayer, community and/or Gd is a commodity to be purchased.

What if you gave yourself permission to come to services this year for another reason-to give yourself permission to feel, truly feel the impact of this last year. To truly feel the magnitude of how different our lives are. Whatever your reality is-the good and the bad-to quiet all the distractions and let your feelings rise to the surface. There is a Yiddish phrase translated that says "If you can't endure the bad, you'll not live to witness the good." The only way to feel true gratitude is not with lip service but rather through feeling the reality of our lives.

And so this Rosh Hashanah I ask you to sit with all your feelings, your joys and your contentment as well as your pain, fear, and anger; to let it bubble up to the surface; to find the psalm or prayer that speaks to you the loudest.

Is it Psalm 121 “I lift my eyes up to the hills. From where does my help come? My help is from the Unseen One, the maker of the heavens and the earth.”

Or maybe it is one of the prayers we will recite tomorrow: Unitaneh Tokef “How many will die and how many will live?”

Or is it the call of the shofar begging us to pay attention.

Or is it Shema Kolenu “Hear our voices, Eternal One, our Gd, and accept our prayer with mercy and good will. Turn us, Ancient One, toward you, let us return.”

Or is it the confessionals that list missed opportunity after missed opportunity.

Or is it the time spent in our zoom lobby where you can chat with lifelong friends you have not seen in a long time and make new ones at the same time.

For the only way to feel gratitude this Rosh Hashanah, maybe every Rosh Hashanah, I have so much to learn, is through an honest reflection on all our feelings, actions and beliefs. The only way to appreciate what I have is to notice what is not. The only way to experience the gifts is to recognize the gaps. For joy and gratitude mean nothing if not in comparison to their opposites.

The truth is when I am done screaming in frustration and disappointment, when my muscles are exhausted, my voice is hoarse, and my spirit is quiet. Then I know I am blessed. For if nothing else, I am here, alive, with another day to write the story of my life on. And this year that might just be enough.

L’shanah Tovah/May this New Year be filled with joy, good health, and purpose. Amen