

Shanah Tovah!

For those of you who are keeping count of which of the classic old Jewish jokes I am using in my sermons over the High Holy Days, tonight I start with a little modernized variation on Old Jewish joke number two thousand... and twenty!

The world's greatest scientists convened a press conference. Astronomers have confirmed that there is a massive meteor, previously undetected, hurtling towards Earth. And they have calculated that as a result of the expected impact, all of the polar ice caps will simultaneously melt, causing an instant, world-wide flood of massive proportions not seen since the Great Flood of Noah in Genesis. In exactly two weeks, if their numbers are correct, the entire surface of the world will be deep underwater.

— I told you this joke was number two thousand and twenty, right?!? It's pretty on-brand for this year!!!

Religious leaders all over the world prepare for the end of human life on Earth.

The pope calls for all Catholics to travel as quickly as possible to the Vatican so that he can simultaneously give the faithful special final rites and sacraments before they all die.

The Dalai Lama proclaims that the world's Buddhists are all to strive to detach from worldly connections so that they can meet their watery end with stillness and compassion.

The cult followers of some guy named Chad all agree to assemble together in Wyoming and drink some strange mixture of Kool-Aid and cyanide.

And the New Atheists all agree to throw a big party on Richard Branson's private island, where he will spend his entire fortune on food and drink, "for tomorrow, we die!"

Meanwhile, Rabbi Myron Levine of Temple Emanuel-Shalom of Livingston, New Jersey ascends the bimah on Shabbat morning and proclaims, "My fellow Jews... it appears we have precisely two weeks.... to learn how to live under water."

Okay, it's not the funniest joke I've ever shared with this congregation! I was asked over the last weeks whether my sermons would be funny this year, and to be totally honest, it's not really that funny of a year — unless you are really into the absurdist school of "It could always be worse" humor!

However, there is an essential wisdom in this joke, something that we ought to remind ourselves of tonight, standing at the gate to the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, in this, the strangest High Holy Days in modern memory.

If there is one encouraging note to be sounded at these virtual High Holy Days it is this: We have, as a people and as individuals, persevered in moments as difficult as this, and many that were even more devastating. It is hard to see the comparisons from within the overloaded place of stress, but our moment of global pandemic mixed with natural disasters, human tragedies and plagues of biblical proportions is still occurring in a moment when the structures that were in place and our novel adaptations that have come into being over the last months have softened what could have, and in an earlier generation certainly would have been, an even heavier impact.

In the waves of cholera epidemics that tore through the United States in the middle of the 19th century, between 5 and 10 percent of residents of all of the major cities in America fell victim to the deadly disease. Today, modern plumbing and access to clean water has made it nearly unheard of. How many of us think twice about the water that magically appears when we turn on the tap?

There are many within this congregation who can still recall the terror that was polio, with outbreaks continuing through the 1950s and into the 60s, affecting children's nervous systems, often resulting in paralysis; it was as scary of a childhood specter as any invisible ghost in a closet or under a bed. Today, if young people know anything about polio, it is that Dr. Jonas Salk developed the vaccine in 1955, and that it is one of those diseases that seems to have been confined to the past.

Outside of the realm of disease and pandemic, I want to say that what feels like an unprecedented moment both is, and is not. Our history as a human race, and our journey as a Jewish community have been shaken by periods of intense disruption, fundamental breaks with the past and earthshaking challenge for the whole history of mortal existence.

I will let the micro-biologists and the historians deal with the medical and general aspects of rupture, change and adaptation. It is for me, it is for now that we examine the specifically Jewish question of what this time could mean for us.

The prayers that we will say over the course of this day are often structured on the rituals of Yom Kippur that are commanded in the Torah and the rabbinic texts. Our machzor describes their procedure: "the priests burn incense in fire-pans, slaughter bulls and lambs as offerings to God, and send a goat into the wilderness to banish the people's sins. The climax of this ritual is the High Priest's entry into the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the Sanctuary, to pronounce aloud the name of God."¹

This is not likely the Yom Kippur you are expecting at Temple Isaiah today — and if it is, I don't really know where to direct you, because it is not Yom Kippur in any synagogue in the world today.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 of the Common Era, animal sacrifice and most of the other rituals of the Sanctuary came to an end, together with the specific roles of the Levites and Priests — to this day, there is no next High Priest of Judaism (which is why I had to make up Rabbi Myron Levine of Livingston, New Jersey to draw a parallel to the Pope and the Dalai Lama!). In the aftermath of the massive loss that was both the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of Jews from the Land of Israel into an Exile that sent them to the far corners of the Earth, the institution of the synagogue came into sharp focus. A central address where the Jewish community could gather for a new form of worship — one in which all could participate with the words of their mouths, for communal prayer came to replace animal sacrifice.

Born out of the flames of destruction, the synagogue became the enduring feature of Jewish communities throughout the world. And as the world changed, the synagogue adapted. The architecture, practices, and prayer languages of Jews in their synagogues had as much to do with the surrounding culture and times as it did with the ancient Jerusalem Temple, likely even more.

1 Mishkan HaNefesh for Yom Kippur, p. 445

And when periods of time came with massive waves of change, disruptions to the world as it always had been, the synagogue adapted along with its surrounding society. Following the era of the Age of Enlightenment, the European Jewish movement called Haskalah (the Hebrew term for Enlightenment), there were those Jewish New Thinkers who predicted an end to the seemingly ancient institution of the synagogue. It would be replaced by the Lehrhaus, the institution of rational Jewish higher learning. They turned out to have greatly exaggerated the story of the synagogue's demise. In fact, if anything, the Enlightenment led to the founding of Reform Judaism, which in turn can be credited with yielding a need for Modern Orthodoxy, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaisms, the whole rainbow of denominational affiliation that is part of the story of the synagogue in the modern world. If anything, Enlightenment led to MORE synagogues, as it gave birth to the old Jewish joke about the Jew stranded on a desert island who, when finally rescued, is found to have built TWO magnificent synagogues on the island where he had been alone. Questioned about why two synagogues, he replies: "This one is my shul... THAT one I wouldn't be caught dead going into!"

The synagogue of today is not the synagogue of my youth. It is also not the synagogue of my years in rabbinical school, where the whole fourth floor of the College-Institute in New York was dedicated to a flagship, visionary organization audaciously titled SYNAGOGUE 2000! It seems quaint now. Though they made substantial contributions to the structures and philosophies of the modern synagogue, I think it was probably a good idea that when they re-branded in the first years of the 21st century, they chose the name SYNAGOGUE 3000 — less of a reason to change the letterhead too soon!

Seriously, though, among the only constants in the two thousand-plus year history of the synagogue is that of change. We change, and we change again. Sometimes building on the structures of the past, often reinterpreting them through a creative lens; occasionally bringing something entirely new to elevate the prayers of this never-dying people. Change has been the constant.

One other constant has been the people. Menschen like you... An assembly of souls who have come together to find community, compassion, meaning, and holiness in the walls of the synagogue. I do not take it for granted that I have the good fortune to serve a holy congregation made up of kind and creative, generous and loving individuals and families. Even in the most challenging moments in these past months of adaptation and improvisation, even when the Zoom links go bad, or the shipment of disinfectant wipes hasn't arrived; when the air conditioning unit goes kaput or the budget committee has to make painful choices; I know that this is a glowing example of what our people have been striving for these two millennia. That we are living in the words of our namesake prophet, Isaiah, who envisioned: "Ki Veiti Beit Tefilah Yikra L'Chol HaAmim — My House shall be called a house of prayer for all people." (56:7)

I am grateful to you, you who have stood with Temple Isaiah over the course of our 50-year history; you who have found your way here on this holiest day of the year out of a need for connection and anchor. I am grateful for the generosity of time and treasure, wisdom and commitment that are all essential to building holy community. You have stood with the leadership of Temple Isaiah in this, extraordinary hour of disruption; and you have stood with Temple Isaiah out of your own deep yearning for that which you find here.

In this hour of challenge and difficulty, I assure you that we will continue to be a synagogue of change and adaptation, a place where the structures of the past provide solid foundations so that we can set our sails to the winds of today, harness the very best of their gusts and carry us into the future. I cannot say how, but I know that this is an era of change, substantial and scary to some degree. But I also know that we will sail together into the future, joined with other holy communities the world over, and linked with the synagogues of past years

who demonstrated the wisdom and flexibility to respond to the sometimes massive changes around them to continue to establish the House of Prayer for All Peoples, the synagogue. And, if anyone has a plan for Rabbi Myron Levine's congregation under water, please send it to him via the US Postal Service to Temple Emanuel-Shalom, 2020 Rockledge Drive, Livingston, NJ!

L'shanah Tovah U'Metukah — Wishing you a Good, Sweet and Healthy New Year.