

Rosh Hashanah 5770
September 19, 2009
"Saying *Shehechyanu* With A Full Heart"
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Some people measure time with a watch, some use a calendar - I measure time by the Jewish holidays. From Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah, I can look out from this Bema and see the new faces that have gathered to join us in worship and I welcome you with joy. From Yom Kippur to Yom Kippur I can also see the absence of some familiar faces and note with sorrow the reality of life's passing. From Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah I can look around my holiday dinner table and observe the changes in my family – a new baby and all of a sudden I am a grandparent, my mother passes away and all of a sudden I am an orphan. Yes, for me things change not hour by hour or day by day, but from holiday to holiday. I remember the last time we gathered here for Rosh Hashanah and the year before that and I can't help but notice how we have changed, how our mood has changed, how our world has changed.

Not many Rosh Hashanahs ago our mood was upbeat and positive - the economy was strong, the outlook was rosy. And this Rosh Hashanah?

If you were to ask me to try and capture what I see, from where I stand; if I were to try and describe our mood as we gather this Rosh Hashanah, - I would have to say that it is marked by a distinct sense of unease. We are unsure, and we are uncertain. We know the world has changed since last Rosh Hashanah, but we are not yet sure exactly how and in precisely what way. We know that the economy has changed - we are not yet sure how permanent or how significant the change. Some sitting here today have experienced an economic upheaval of catastrophic proportions, others have remained relatively unaffected. There has been an earthquake and the epicenter of this financial disruption is not far from where we sit. Some have lost fortunes, others have lost jobs or businesses, some of us have seen incomes reduced – some by a little, some by a lot and many, too many, have lost hope. I have spoken to some of you in ways we have never spoken before: "Rabbi, I never before in my life have asked for help – but rabbi, I need help." "Rabbi, I've never depended on anyone for anything but here is my resume rabbi, if you hear of anything let me know." "Rabbi, I have never had to say no to my children before – but this time when my son said he wanted to go to camp, I had to say no, it broke my heart rabbi to have to say no to my son."

With many of you I celebrated a *simcha* this past year – a wedding, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a graduation or the birth of a child – and that softened the bitterness of the financial challenges, which this year presented. But others felt like insult was added to injury as they also wrestled with personal crisis on top of economic crisis - maybe in the form of the death of a loved one or a medical diagnosis that meant this year was going to be one of struggle and fear.

For too many of us, the fundamental assumptions upon which our lives were built – that tomorrow would always be better than today, that tomorrow we will have more, be more, be able to afford more, than today – this assumption has been shaken to its core. Mature adults who thought they were valued members of a work place found that assumption was not true. Young adults who had worked hard, went to all the right schools and thought their degree would guarantee them a job found that it would not. And most of us come here today, on this Rosh Hashanah less assured, less confident about the future than ever before.

But you don't come here on this sacred day for a weather report – you don't come to have the rabbi tell you how you feel - but in the hope that at this time of unease, this Service and this moment can help you to feel better. Can it? Yes, I believe it can. There is something wonderfully reassuring about this place and the familiarity of the High Holy Day liturgy. Familiar prayers, like the comfort of old friends, remind us that although much has changed, much remains the same. OK, we don't have that wonderful choir from Israel that was here last year – but thank God the Cantor is still here, and the rabbi and well, I guess we'll just have to sing a little louder, with a little more gusto to make up for the choir. God willing it will be back next year.

It is heartening to note, in the midst of our unease - that this place and these prayers are here for us as they were for our ancestors. We gain a sense of confidence just in our coming together - a reminder that no matter the source of our unease - this too shall pass as it has for countless generations before us. We hold this book in our hands and we just know that, as our Israeli cousins say, *iyeh tov*, all will be well.

And that is why I would like to begin by inviting you to join me in prayer. Actually not so much a prayer, I would like to invite you to join me in a *bracha* – a blessing. Fortunes have been lost, lives have been uprooted but still we are here and I think that is worth a *bracha* of thanksgiving – please join me in the *shehechyanu*:

Now let's conduct a little experiment. What were you thinking as we recited the *shehechyanu*?

I suspect that there were some who said, "You know, the rabbi's right – it has been a tough year – or maybe a downright lousy year – but it is Rosh Hashanah and I am here and I do have what to be thankful for," and you were able to join me in reciting *shechyanu* with a heart full of thanksgiving – even though and despite everything that might have transpired in your life this past year.

I suspect there were others for whom these words did not come so easily.

You don't have to tell me, or anyone, what you were really thinking as I led the recitation of the *shehechyanu* – but I do want you to be honest with yourself – I want to use that *bracha* – that recitation as a sort of Rorschach emotional test for Rosh Hashanah 5770. What were you thinking when I pushed you to say: "Praised are You, Lord our God...?" Was praise, something that flowed easily from your lips – or were you thinking: "Yeah thanks God for the job I lost and the mortgage I can't pay. Thank you Lord for the illness that took my wife or the cancer that threatens my life. O' Lord, I really do appreciate the 6 weeks of chemo that I will be beginning right after the holidays!" When you said: *shehechyanu, v'kiyamanu, v'higianu lazman hazeh* – "Thank you Lord for keeping me alive and enabling me to reach this moment" – did you mean it? Did you feel the joy, the privilege of being here, alive, at this moment – or were you thinking – "Yeah, thanks God for keeping me alive – barely." "Yeah Lord, I want to express my heartfelt appreciation that you have enabled me to reach this moment when I can no longer pay my bills and feed my family and support myself – I am deeply grateful for ALL that you have done for me this past year – Amen!"

What were you thinking when we recited this prayer? Is your attitude on this Rosh Hashanah as you sit in this sanctuary – is it primarily an attitude of gratitude or resentment. Joy or anger? Hope or fear?

For the next few minutes, we are going to go on a little journey together, you and I – and I know where I want us to end but first I need you to be honest with yourself, about where you are beginning. We are going to end – will I ruin the sermon if I tell you how it ends? I don't think so – you know me well enough by now – it ends with joy, it concludes with gratitude the last word is given to hope. But if that is not where you are at – if you came here today with more resentment than gratitude, more anger than joy, more fear than hope – well that just means we have our work cut out for us.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Edward Feinstein, the senior rabbi at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California told me of a member of his congregation who came to him this past year with his resume and said, “rabbi, maybe you can help me find a job.” And he looked at the man's resume and it was indeed impressive. It had his current position and past positions, education, accolades and awards, but then he turned the page over and asked: – where is the other page? And the man said, what do you mean the other page, this is my CV –and Rabbi Feinstein said, no there is all kinds of stuff missing. You have been married to the same woman for the last 25 years— and I know you and I know what kind of a rich and sweet and loving relationship and marriage you have; –you have three of the nicest kids, kids that I enjoy, I taught them and I celebrated with them their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and they have turned into some young adults with real character and really sweet *neshamas* – where is that here? – You have a circle of friends, wonderful friends - friends that have been with you in moments of great pain, friends that have been with you to celebrate and that is not listed here. You give your time, I know you give your time, where is that? There is a second side to the resume and for some reason it gets erased when it goes through the Xerox machine. And that is the side that is the source of the essential, of personal worth.

And if the first side, the educational accolades, the professional accomplishments – if that is all you use to define yourself, your success and failures – than you are only a half a human being. If all I am, is what I do for a living – who am I when I don't do that any more? If my resume only has one side – how vulnerable we are when we lose that one side.

And to some extent I am at fault, we are at fault – we have not emphasized that second side of the resume enough and the value of what it represents. We have not made it sufficiently clear to you that there is another side to success and another realm of what it means to be human.

The economy is tough, the future is uncertain. Jobs are being lost, homes are at risk, fortunes are being threatened – but there is another side to success and another realm to what it means to be human – and these High Holy Days and this place are dedicated to that other realm, to the second side of your resume, and it is time you rediscovered it as well. Don't forget the second side of your resume!

And the sad part of it all is that the second side is deeply affected by the first side when it should be the other way around. I am less effective as a father when my job is lost. I am less loving as a wife when my career is cut short. And it should be precisely the opposite.

Define success. Wait, I'll do it for you. If there is someone you can call at 3 AM and say – I am

in trouble and that person says – “I’ll be right there!” You are a success. If you have a person to hold and share and care and sing and dance with – you are a success. If you have created a life, nurtured a child, kissed away a boo boo, taken a late night call from college – you are a success. If you have a note tucked away in a desk or in a drawer – a card that says thank you – thank you for caring, thank you for helping, thank you for being there for me when I needed you – you are a success.

Maybe this most recent of crisis is a gift – and as the Obama people say, “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste...” As the front side of our resumes have takes such a beating, maybe it is time this Rosh Hashanah to turn them over and remember that they do have another side – and to remember that the world does not begin and end with the first side. Or to remember that in Hebrew we read from right to left – the back page is the front page.

But this is not just about, “learning to count your blessings,” it is much more than that. I invited you to join with me in reciting *shehechyanu* because counting blessings is a very tricky business. You lost your job – well that clearly qualifies as bad news. You got married – *mazel tov* that certainly seems to be a blessing. But, I have had people sit in my office and tell me – “The day I married that woman was the dumbest thing I ever did!” Or, I have had people say to me, “losing my job was the best thing that ever happened to me!” Most of the time marriage is a good thing – but not always. Most of the time losing your job is a bad thing – but not always. It is not always easy to distinguish between the blessings and the crisis in our lives. It would be nice if they came clearly labeled – but they don’t. It takes a certain amount of maturity and skill and experience to sort out the blessings and the curses of life. And many times the things we thought were curses turned out to be blessings in disguise and vice versa.

Ever hear of Saadia Gaon? Well, he is well known to any serious student of Judaism he was born in Egypt around 882 and he died in Baghdad around 940. He was a prominent rabbi, philosopher and exegete of the Geonic period. One of his works, *Emunot V’Dayot* was the first systematic attempt to reconcile Jewish Philosophy with Greek Philosophy – and any serious study of Jewish philosophy always begins with Saadia. But here is something I am sure you did not know about Saadia. What we know about Saadia’s life comes from fragments of letters that were discovered as part of the Cairo Geniza. And it appears from his letters that his departure from his native home of Egypt was not one of choice. From everything we have it appears he was fired from his job and that led to his departure. But the result of this change in his life catapulted him onto a world stage as not only one of the great Jewish leaders of his age – but because he was fired he had time to write a book that we read and study 1000 years later. And when he was rehired, he disappeared back into the bureaucracy. Imagine what Saadia must have been thinking right after he was fired. What must have looked to him and his family as the greatest catastrophe in his life – made him into an immortal.

All of us have had moments where we get what we want and it just turns out wrong – it poisons our family, severs our friendships or consumes us in ways we could never have anticipated. Do you think Bernie Madoff sitting in his jail cell now wishes he had not “succeeded” with his Investment Advisory Firm the way he did? And if he doesn’t, I know a lot of people who thought he was a blessing in their lives but who now count him as one of their greatest curses.

Abraham Joshua Heschel tried to capture this paradox of life when he wrote: “In our own lives, the voice of God speaks slowly, a syllable at a time. Reaching the peak of years, dispelling some of our intimate illusions and learning how to spell the meaning of life-experiences

backwards, some of us discover how the scattered syllables form a single phrase.”

Indeed, if we are lucky some of us do learn how to spell the meaning of life experiences - but as Heschel teaches us – at best it comes later in life with maturity and only in looking backwards. It is very hard to decipher the meaning of life’s moments as they are unfolding. Blessings and curses, for some strange reason seem to like to dress up as each other.

I bet most of you wouldn’t have a hard time thinking of an example from your own lives when something you were so convinced was a blessing turned out to be quite different and something you were so sure was a curse turned out to be a blessing in disguise. If you have a moment, write me a note, send me an email – share with me your experiences of this paradox, how it happened in your life and what you learned from it.

There is a wonderful song by Garth Brooks that came out about a year ago where he does just that, again my friend Rabbi Feinstein brought it to my attention –the song is called “Unanswered Prayers” – anyone here know it? I understand this might not be a big Garth Brooks crowd – so you can check it out after the holiday but here are the lyrics which describes how he discovered this paradoxical truth:

Just the other night
At a hometown football game my wife and I ran into my old high school flame
And as I introduced them the past came back to me
And I couldn't help but think of the way things used to be

She was the one that I'd wanted for all times
And each night I'd spend prayin' that God would make her mine
And if He'd only grant me this wish I wished back then
I'd never ask for anything again

And then the refrain:
Sometimes I thank God - for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because He doesn't answer doesn't mean He don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

She wasn't quite the angel that I remembered in my dreams
And I could tell that time had changed me in her eyes too it seemed
We tried to talk about the old days there wasn't much we could recall
I guess the Lord knows what he's doin' after all

And as she walked away and I looked at my wife
And then and there I thanked the good Lord for the gifts in my life

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because He may not answer doesn't mean He don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts are all too often unanswered. Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

And just in case you aren't Garth Brooks fans, this same point is made in one of my favorite stories in the Bible. The Joseph story is told in remarkable detail – we meet him as a young boy full of dreams and hopes and the Bible follows him through his long and tumultuous life. And everything in his life that looks like a triumph turns out to be a catastrophe; and everything that looks like a catastrophe is merely the opportunity for the next major turning point in his life. His father gives him a coat of many colors, privileges over all his brothers - - things couldn't be better than this – but the coat becomes a source of enormous jealousy and resentment leading to his brothers tossing him in the pit and leaving him to die. There sits poor Joseph in a pit – could things be any worse than this - -but this creates the opportunity for the passing caravan of Ishmaelites to rescue him and take him with them on their way to Egypt. So, Joseph is out of the pit and on his way to Egypt – a new adventure; things look rosy – until the Ishmaelites decided to sell him as a slave to Potiphar a wealthy Egyptian. Could anything be worse than our hero being a slave working in a rich man's house? But due to his talent, brains and charisma – Joseph is soon running the place and serving as Potiphar's right hand man – life is not so bad as a trusted servant in a wealthy Egyptian household – till he attracts the interest of Potiphar's wife who tries to seduce him. When our hero, loyal and faithful that he is – resists her advances – she turns on him accusing him of trying to seduce her and he incurs the wrath of his employer who has him thrown into jail. Once again – things could not possibly be worse for poor Joseph, languishing in an Egyptian jail – but it is here that he meets fellow prisoners – the Pharaoh's baker and cup-bearer and interprets their dreams so that latter when the Pharaoh himself needs dream help they rescue Joseph from the dungeon and he will ascend to become the second most powerful man in all of Egypt – Pharaoh's most trusted advisor. So the story appears to have a happy ending – if we didn't know that it was Joseph's success and the bringing of his entire family down to live under his protection and bask in his wealth and good fortune – that would eventually lead to a change of heart by a new Pharaoh who, "knew not Joseph.." and what followed was 400 years of Jewish enslavement and the rest you know from your Passover tables.

It is a brilliantly constructed tale – it teaches us all that the reality we live in has many dimensions and we should never get discouraged if the one we are focusing on doesn't work out. Yes, blessings and curses love to dress up as one another.

Before we leave the Joseph story – one other insight is worth gleaning from his experience. In the beginning he listened only to his own dreams. He had dreams of his brothers bowing down to him, dreams of his own success and self-aggrandizement – and those dreams led him into nothing but trouble – at the end he listens to the dreams of others – the baker and cup bearer in prison and ultimately to the dreams of Pharaoh himself and it was only when he started listening to the dreams of others, started focusing on the needs of others, that his own circumstances started to improve.

As the old saying goes, a person wrapped up in himself makes for a small package. The loss of a job, the loss of our savings, and the loss of wealth accumulated over years of hard work – it is understandable that this would lead us to become preoccupied with our own needs, our own sorrows, and our own challenges. The loss of health – the challenges of dealing with a terrible diagnosis – this understandably leads to a preoccupation with our own bodies, our own treatments and a preoccupation with ourselves – but however understandable and however necessary – such a preoccupation cannot and will not lead us to the places we ultimately need to go. Crisis causes us to look inward – to take care of business at home -but at some point our gaze cannot remain inward alone. There is a fine line between self-help and self-worship.

My great objection to much of what passes as self-help on the shelves of most book stores today – is that it encourages a journey inward alone– it teaches that all you need can be found in yourself. And while it may sell a lot of books to the “me” generation – it is a false messiah that promises salvation if you would only believe in yourself.

My great objection to the contemporary fascination with *kabbalah*, and too much of the *baal teshuvah* movement in Judaism is that it is a corruption of the traditional enterprise of kabbalah and Judaism– the journey inward in authentic kabbalah was a journey that ultimately led you outward – the current fad is merely using traditional texts to play into a contemporary egotism, it is all about what it can do for you and not about what you can do for others and for the world. Crisis necessitates a turning inward – that is certainly understandable. But as Jews, we turn inward to regroup, re-strengthen our resources and to prepare ourselves for the important work of repair of the world as even more crucial than the repair of ourselves.

My friends it has indeed been a tough year for all of us – a year of crisis for some of us – but to everyone I beseech you continue to live fully.

Author Kent Nerburn wrote a book titled LETTERS TO MY SON: A Father's Wisdom on Manhood, Life, and Love. In one letter, he teaches his son the value of living fully. He writes:

"Remember to be gentle with yourself and others. We are all children of chance, and none can say why some fields will blossom and others lay brown beneath the August sun. Care for those around you. Look past your differences. Their dreams are no less than yours, their choices in life no more easily made. And give. Give in any way that you can, of whatever you possess. To give is to love. To withhold is to wither. Care less for your harvest than how it is shared, and your life will have meaning and your heart will have peace."

So go out and live fully! That is my message to you this year. Continue to live fully – do not let the challenges, difficulties and losses of this past year, no matter how severe –don't let them keep you from living your life fully. Continue to live, continue to embrace life with love and laughter; continue to give. People who live well are experts at giving. They give their time; they give their money. They share their wisdom and they share their skills. They share their life and they share their love. To live is to give and to withhold is to wither.

And of all the things you choose to give in the year to come – give thanks to God – *af al pi cheyn v'lamrot hakol* – even though, and in spite of everything that has happened, give thanks to God. – *shehechyanu, v'kiyamanu lazman hazeh* – that He has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this very special moment.

So let us conclude with the *shehechyanu*, and this time, as we say these words, let's see if we can find a way to say them with hearts filled with gratitude for the blessings that are ours today.