

**Rabbi Alicia Magal's Drashot for 5782, 2021 High Holy Days
Jewish Community of Sedona and the Verde Valley**

Erev Rosh Hashanah, Monday, September 6, 2021

Shalom Haverim... A very warm welcome to all of you on this eve of the Jewish New Year 5782.

Last year we pre-recorded the entire sweep of the High Holy Days, so they were viewed as edited videos. This year we have become comfortable with combining live services in the sanctuary in real time with people participating or watching from home. Over the past year and a half, we have demonstrated resilience and an ability to adapt to this new reality in the face of restrictions necessitated by the pandemic. This congregation and its leaders responded to upgrade and increase our technological capability, so that we actually expanded our membership to former members who had moved away, relatives and friends in other states and time zones, and new members and guests who were interested and liked our homey, warm interactive programs.

During the first 4 or 5 months since March 2020 we adjusted our services, programs, and classes to be virtual. I opened a Zoom link which I called KESHER - meaning Connection, because that technology on Zoom allowed us to see and hear each other from our homes nearly every day... Monday we had a check-in and uplifting readings or poetry related to how we were adjusting to the forced isolation and canceled travel plans at the beginning of the pandemic. On Tuesday, I led a discussion about Hebrew prayers for a range of occasions. On Wednesday, we had morning minyan, and in the late afternoon a Jewish Meditation class co-taught by Rosalie Malter and me. On Thursdays we held our Torah study since several of the key people wouldn't be able to participate online on Shabbat morning. On Friday evenings, we led early Erev Shabbat services to accommodate members and guests in different time zones.

On Saturday night for those months, Itzhak and I led Havdalah from our home to say goodbye at the close of Shabbat in the same way we had welcomed in Shabbat on Friday evening.

During the past months we ended the Monday, Tuesday and Saturday night programs, but kept the Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday services and classes, as well as all committee meetings where the chairs and committee members did all the planning for fundraising projects, Social Action and Educational programs, Havurah meetings and programs on Thursdays or Sundays, Bikkur Holim check-ins for those who were ill, Membership outreach to stay in touch with each one of our members, facility planning for maintenance and upgrades to our building with all its systems, and leadership decisions that impact the entire congregation by the Board of Directors.

The bulletin board remained the same with the pages from the March 2020 newsletter displayed for over a year and a half. Now, since mid-August, we have again opened the building to those who make reservations to attend services in person, while keeping the online option as well. The bulletin board now displays the latest calendar and articles from the September newsletter.

This new set-up is quite complex, but it was agreed that we wanted to encourage participation from people who could not be present in person, and so you will be able to see and hear members offering readings, and, at tomorrow morning's service, having aliyot both here in the room and through the technology of Zoom. Everyone in the sanctuary will see those people participating from home on the large screens installed in the sanctuary, and everyone at home will watch the service livestreamed through the cameras at the back of the sanctuary. We are grateful to videographers Ron Melmon and Angelo LaMarco for their expertise, to Sheryl Tuchman who got us started on livestreaming even before the pandemic so we were ready to go virtual immediately, to Jenny Hirst who has spent countless hours learning the livestreaming and Zoom technology, and has been dealing with the technology at Friday night services, and for the media connections through which you signed up for these services, and to Bonnie Golub who created slides for home viewers to follow the prayers if they did not have a Machzor- a High Holy Day prayer book, and to Meri Thomason who shares the delightful task of screening the slides for Friday night and High

Holy Day services. Our cantorial soloist, Marden Paul, is also present with us on Zoom for Rosh Hashanah, and God-willing, is planning to travel here from his home in Toronto for all the Yom Kippur services. This is truly a team effort and we owe all of them our gratitude.

I wanted you to know what extensive preparation has gone into bringing you these High Holy Day services, and though we cannot have a choir, we will enjoy a few solos by our members on Yom Kippur. **We shall not dwell on what we cannot do, but rather realize how hard we have worked to create meaningful and satisfying services, adapting our traditions to emphasize what we CAN do!** Those seated here are wearing masks. No one will come up to the Ark for an aliyah but rather will stand close by to offer the blessings and receive a blessing. We will not have a procession with the Torah, but you will hear the verses chanted either by me or by our cantorial soloist, and that is the essence of the Torah service. We all need to think in a very creative and positive way of what we can accomplish rather than dwelling on our restrictions.

Tomorrow morning, I will speak about our commitment to rededication and renewal—how we have learned to cope and what we have learned. The crisis is not over yet, and having to be limited in our activities over such a long time period is very exhausting... So how did we adjust? What do we now realize was an “**unappreciated luxury**,” simple activities that we are now tentatively trying to be able to do again.... Sitting together in a synagogue or a social event, eating with friends at our homes or in a restaurant, traveling easily, visiting with children, grandchildren, or loved ones in nursing homes, and so many other everyday activities that we had to omit over the past year and a half.

As this New Year beckons us to consider our highest priorities and relationships, let us come to realize what values and people are most vital to our well-being and sense of being alive.

Stay with us for a deeper conversation over the next days. *L'shanah Tovah, tikateivu v'teichateimu...* may each one here tonight watching or present be written and sealed in the Book of Living Fully.

(See next page for Rosh Hashanah Morning)

Rosh Hashanah Morning

Tuesday, September 7, 2021

Rosh Hashanah has always been a time for renewal, but this year it does feel especially like we are entering a time of Rededication and Revitalization. It is certainly, for the whole world, a time of uneven recovery and re-emergence into more social activities. For us Jews, as we are focused on doing a review of the challenges of the year, it is even more consciously a time of personal responsibility and repair. We really have seen how very interconnected we all are, across national boundaries, time zones, and generations.

After the shock of canceling vacations and trips, after the hard decisions we had to make which kept families apart because of the danger of spreading the virus, a new kind of limited, reduced routine rhythm set in. For many, the time at home rather than days filled with social visits, errands, meetings in person, browsing through stores, and writing to-do lists that never got completed, there was a kind of quiet and simplicity that governed our days. Some people began to clear out closets, organize photo albums or more recent digital files, and found that they actually appreciated the time alone or with a spouse or a small pod of friends, perhaps meeting only outside for brief get-togethers. NO shaking hands or hugging - such simple and automatic gestures - now reduced to a wave or nod or elbow bump. Many people began working at home rather than at an office and joined meetings on Zoom rather than by business travel. Children and grandchildren could not attend school in person but rather attended virtual classrooms. Our own grandchildren learned to read and do simple arithmetic in their online kindergarten class, and all by themselves called us on Facetime during breaks.

For a time, there was no dining out, or coffee with a friend at their house, or live theater, or movies, spa, gym classes, massages, or so many other activities that seemed suddenly impossible and even dangerous. Many people let their hair grow long, or grow out grey! When we watched movies or binged series on Netflix, as many of us did... a lot... and saw scenes with crowds at a stadium or packed together at a concert we thought, "Wow, that was from another era!" We didn't go to stores but rather ordered online from Amazon with too easy a click, and many had groceries delivered to their door.

Perhaps we read, as I did, dozens of books. Perhaps the area where we all expanded and learned the most is in the area of technology. Few of us had heard of Zoom and now most of us are comfortable at Zoom meetings, programs, and services. I led baby namings and memorials on Zoom, observed a few b'nai mitzvah ceremonies that were livestreamed for children of our close friends who live in other states and countries, and had many lively conversations with our children and grandchildren in LA and NY on Facetime. Suddenly we had the means to connect with people we had not seen in a long time or who live very far away.

We had to let a lot go that previously we had thought important. It has been a time of prioritizing, clearing, getting down to basics during a prolonged time of isolation and distancing. No need to fill up the car for months! No need to get dressed up... well maybe just a clean shirt, since only our face and shoulders appeared in the little square on the computer screen.

Each year I answer a series of 10 questions - it's called 10Q if you look it up online, about how the past year impacted me and what I wish for the coming year. I review it each year. For last year's summary there was a supplemental question asking for a Six-Word Memoir on Life during Coronatime. Here is what I wrote last year:

What's Your Six-Word Memoir on Life during Coronatime?

Isolation
Cancellations
Creativity
Zoom-connectivity
Prioritization
Blessings?

This year I would write:

Emerging
Adaptation
Reevaluation
Relief
Gratitude
Blessing!

There have been some surprising advantages: **Appreciation has gotten finer**. Watching day by day how a rose bush begins to bloom, savoring a well-prepared home-cooked meal, learning to bake challah, sensing the moisture in the air or small changes as the seasons moved to colder, then warmer, then rainy. We became more observant, and little things like a call or a note or a caring smile awakened in us deeper levels of gratitude.

Every Friday a Shabbat Zoom call started by my friend Tovah Feldshuh for a circle of close family and friends met to check in and take turns saying the Shabbat blessings in various melodies over candles, wine, and challah. I blessed the children as well as everyone on the call and spoke about the Torah portion of that week. We have just completed our 73rd such Shabbat Zoom call spanning many time zones. Perhaps you participated in family Zoom meetings that dissolved geographical separation.

The only thing that mattered was to ascertain what time zone the host was in!

Our own Wednesday morning minyan met without interruption and nearly always had a full minyan, so we could support each other in saying kaddish for a loved one who had passed away or whose yahrzeit was that week. People who otherwise could not have participated were now able to join through Zoom and feel that warm connection of community in prayer.

As we are now considering ourselves in the presence of the heavenly Creator, and are asking to be judged mercifully, one word from our new Zoom vocabulary comes to mind:

UNMUTE – How often do we have a thought to express but in our little square on the screen we fail to unmute our voice? This is a time to UNMUTE and express ourselves, to speak up, to ask forgiveness and offer forgiveness, tell of our regrets of how our words or actions were not aligned with our highest values, with the mitzvot of generosity and kindness to others. Have we spoken out for justice in our community, brought food for the hungry? Have we unmuted our secret longings to improve and grow, and reach out to deepen relationships in new ways? Can we now unmute when it is helpful and remain muted in the face of gossip or unkind tales about others? That mute and unmute button offers a great lesson about the importance of when to speak out and when to keep silent.

During these Days of Awe, let us consider in what ways we proved resilient, in what ways we have taken steps toward recovery, how we might rededicate ourselves to being more connected by any means possible with positive activities, people, learning opportunities, and acts of social justice!

Alongside every zoom meeting is the CHAT column where people would write to individuals on the call or else to the host or to everyone. That sidebar record is like our inner thoughts and comments that are recorded in our very own Book of Life. Let us be proud of the lines we ourselves have written there and make a sincere effort to delete any negative remarks.

The file is still open during these Ten Days of Awe, of Repentance, of Repair. We are authors of our daily choices of

words and deeds, so let's all make an effort to edit, readjust, realign, and arrive on Yom Kippur with a much cleaner, clearer, record.

Unmute for prayer, for singing the true song of our soul. May we be like the shofar, proclaiming our unique sound which enables us to connect with other beings here today and throughout the generations. **Unmute the voice of your heart** which yearns to link us to the essence of what it is to be human. **Unmute your expression of gratitude** in having the gift of life. Let's make a joyful noise unto the Lord. let us unmute!

(See next page for Kol Nidre)

Kol Nidre

Erev Yom Kippur, Wednesday evening, September 15, 2021

The haunting melody of Kol Nidre sung by the cantor and played on the cello by Tom Hoisch tug at our neshamah, our very souls. The words in Aramaic speak of the wish to wipe the record clean, to recognize those vows and promises we were not able to keep after sincere effort, and to allow us to lift that burden from our hearts so we can commit again to walking a path of consistent behavior. Our tradition doesn't hold up an impossible yardstick of perfection but rather offers concrete ways to return to a middle path of compassionate, ethical words and actions that are life-affirming. We face the specter of our limited life span and rather than despair, we learn ways to make our time worthwhile with a deeper soul-purpose that brings joy to ourselves and to those we touch in this lifetime.

We pray in the plural – we have sinned, we have spoken badly, we have avoided doing our part.... and so, we shine a light on our blind spots. It is slightly uncomfortable, but actually offers a relief from feelings of unworthiness or guilt. Face it! Own it!! Deal with it!!! ...and now walk upright and proud of your heritage and your particular gifts.

This is a time of reconnection – with our deepest yearnings, with our close relationships, with our religious and spiritual teachings and guidance.

Let us look at two beautiful models of spiritual life right here in this synagogue. The new sculpture of a Star of David hanging on the wall, and the Tree of Life in the lobby, both by John Soderberg, world-renowned sculptor, contain symbols of the unfolding progression of creative energy:

The star is a combination of two triangles, one descending from the heavenly realm, and the other emerging from the ground of the earth, and meeting in the heart space of the present moment. The sculpture of this star combines other symbolic elements: the lions of Judah, the words in Hebrew,

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. Hear O Israel, God – our Divine Creative Source - is One; and *Shiviti Adonai l'negdi tamid*, I keep God before me always as a lens.

The Tree of Life, *Etz chaim*, has organic roots within which are gems representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The trunk and main branches form the Hebrew word Etz, Tree, and the new leaves represent the founders of this synagogue mishpacha – extended family, as well as continuous new leaves that are added to represent simchas, weddings, births, happy occasions to celebrate. You here today are invited to celebrate your simchas by adding to the leaves on our Tree of Life.

During these days we are looking back and reflecting, but also taking this opportunity to look at this precious moment right now and give thanks for the gift of life. We still have many opportunities to make choices to enhance the quality of our lives and the lives of those around us, including those we don't even know, through our mitzvot and acts of kindness. So tomorrow we will look ahead to the future and each one of us, in our own hearts, will affirm what we wish to achieve, to learn, to accomplish, to settle, in the year to come. We will be strengthened by the communal energy of those sitting here and viewing online. May our renewed appreciation of TIME lead us to rededicate ourselves to our soul-purpose with renewed joy and a refreshed soul.

For those who fast, have an easy and meaningful fast. For those who cannot fast, perhaps you can restrict your food to what is necessary for your health and be conscious of what you take for nourishment. We have food bins for your donations of non-perishable products to donate to the local food bank. There are so many who fast not because of choice, but because they simply do not have enough food.

May we be sealed in the Book of Living Fully since there is yet so much to do.

Yom Kippur Morning

Thursday, September 16, 2021

Shalom my dear friends.

Since Rosh Hashanah I have spoken about our experiences of the past year and how we showed resilience. Last night I spoke about ways in which we reconnect with our own internal compass, with repair of relationships, and with a renewed link to our Jewish tradition and spiritual connection. It is a time of recovery and discovery. Through our prayers and music, we have drawn on energy greater than our own individual power.

This morning, on this Day of Atonement, At-One-Ment, I am going to pose the question, **where do we go from here? What have we learned? How do we transform a difficult, challenging time into a positive and beneficial experience?**

We know that after trauma there can be PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with severe setbacks and triggers that affect a person even once the danger has passed. But there is a completely different realm of study that is profoundly empowering --It is PTG: **Post-Traumatic Growth** which is the positive psychological change that some individuals experience after a life crisis or traumatic event. Post-traumatic growth does NOT deny deep distress, but rather posits that adversity can unintentionally yield changes in understanding oneself, others, and the world. Results can be in the areas of:

- 1: Appreciation of life and awareness of personal strengths
- 2: Reprioritization of values, what really matters.
- 3: Improved relationships with others; increase in compassion and altruism
- 4: New possibilities in life; appreciation and awareness of blessings.
- 5: Personal and spiritual change; creativity in art, poetry, expression of hopefulness; survivor literature that is inspiring.

If you look up Post-Traumatic Growth you will find a wealth of literature expanding on the brief description I just gave.

I just finished reading “My Stroke of Insight” by Jill Bolte Taylor, Ph.D., a neuroscientist who suffered a stroke and was able to describe exactly what was going on as she lost abilities and then worked to regain them, in an inspiring narrative of her healing and growth in a new, expanded understanding of her personality and identity.

What did we learn and how did we grow despite or because of the year and a half of isolation and restrictions? How did we deepen our close relationships? In what ways have we expanded to a new level of connection?

With this theory, even a negative experience can lead to expansion and integration. Because we were isolated and less distracted, we were able to reduce anxiety and find time to be calm. We learned to value the closest friendships and to let go of extraneous or toxic relationships and unnecessary social activities. We realized what is truly life-enhancing and important rather than filling our time with energy-draining tasks.

We realized how important our support is for our family, our synagogue, and our community, in ways we hadn't appreciated before. There is a way in which a “Tough Teacher” can actually help us grow. This last year has been a mighty tough teacher! In today's Torah selection we hear “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem....*” “You are all gathered here today... along with those not here.” We understand that to mean that along with ancient ancestors who heard Moses describing the life-affirming choices that lead to blessing, we too are included on this day - *hayom* – and surrounding us are the souls of all those we have lost as well as the souls yet to be born in the future. We stand in mighty company across the ages!

This afternoon at our Yizkor service we will reflect on the names of so many loved ones whom we loved and who helped form who we are. That remembrance will offer a reconnection with that link that exists beyond physical death.

And, in the later *Neilah*, closing service, we will look forward to those aspirations and hopes we have for this next year. Before the gates of heaven close, we will have a strong and hopeful sense that the good we have done will outweigh any sins, regrets, or missing of the mark. We have done a lot of good during a year of restrictions and isolation. Let us continue on that path of compassion and generosity.

We learn that every act we do tips the scales of the entire world, and so we must take our every word and action seriously. This year beginning now is a year of *shmitta*, every seventh year, described in the Torah as a year when the land is to lie fallow, debts are canceled, and it is time for a new start, a reset, a reboot. Let us find ways to honor the *shmitta* year, to honor the environment and find a better balance in our lives.

Let us wake up, look around with new eyes, hear with new ears, and be sensitive to how we relate to our environment – the amount of water we use, reduction in use of plastic, being modest in our buying habits, and consider increasing contributions to organizations close and far which help the less fortunate, the ill, the displaced, and the unprotected ones in our community, in Israel, or around the world.

Let us guard our tongue and avoid gossip, and most importantly, let us each use our particular talents and gifts to add to the weight of good actions on the global scales of justice and compassion.

The next festival coming in four days is Sukkot, the harvest holiday, when we withdraw to small, fragile huts where we express our gratitude for the bounty in our lives. At that time, we will draw together the lulav and etrog as symbols of our entire bodies and the representatives of the entire community. The teachings and inspirations and commitments we made during these Days of Awe have time to create in us a new turning of the heart, so that at the end of that week or 8 days, we emerge, like the metamorphosis of the butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. We humans will be ready to fly with new, lighter, spiritual wings.

Let us take this solemn day of fasting and reflection to honor the best that is within us, to connect with those we loved who are no longer present on this earth, but very present in our hearts, and feel complete and whole and clear when those gates close and the final shofar blast is heard at the end of this long day.

May we all be written and sealed in the Book of Living Fully.