5783 2022 Rabbi Ma

What is the spark for this year’s drashot?

**AWAKE** as the theme, turning into **Awakenings**

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**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783, Sunday, September 25, 2022**

At this season, beginning in the month of Elul, and now during the Ten Days of Awe, we are urged to Wake Up. The shofar is loud and strident and shakes us to our bones and cells, and wakes us up to the present so we can listen; so we can wake up to our mistakes and omissions although the liturgy called them sins. We cannot stay too comfortable, too drowsy, too spiritually asleep to new possibilities. This is a time for stepping out of that comfort zone of habit into new ways of interacting and showing up in our family, our community, the wider world. And if we are not so perfect and self-satisfied then that hopefully leads us to have more compassion for others who also aren’t perfect, and who annoy, exasperate, or even upset us.

And there is this weighing of values –

Would you like to hear about a rabbi’s nightmare? I guess a teacher dreams of being in front of the class with no lesson plan, or a performer dreams of being on stage in their underwear with no script, and a race driver might dream about crashing in flames… but here is a variation of a recurring dream I have:

I am in a different synagogue as a guest leader that has thick columns in the space where congregants sit. I’m up at the podium and about to read from the Torah, only the Torah isn’t set to the current portion, and what’s more, I’m not sure what that portion is.

I look behind me to a room full of scrolls and I check each one – some are complete, others are illustrations of Genesis, or partial books of the Torah, others are very thin, tied by ribbons, and perhaps are children’s versions but not the full Hebrew Torah. This is taking time and I know that people are getting impatient and might start to leave.

I look for a Hebrew calendar to check what the current Torah portion is – are we in Exodus? Numbers? Deuteronomy? This information should be so easily available. Where do they keep it, like I do in my office? I rush back to the podium, look out at the people still sitting and waiting and I think, never mind this particular portion or week, what is important is to connect and give a message that is useful and helpful and relevant.

So, I leave the podium, run down in between these large posts, and look at each of the remaining congregants sitting there and I say with great feeling, “Remember the Exodus and how we went forth to freedom!” There is an electric moment of connection and a spark of awakening in me and in them, and… I wake up from that dream or some other variation of it that I’ve had over the years.

I always set the Torah early in the week and I always have a Hebrew calendar at hand so that I’m aware of each week’s Torah portion as I ponder its message during the week leading up to Shabbat.

So, though I always prepare and study, my deepest desire that came through in this time of unconscious dream state is to connect with you and bring our messages from our text and history, and holy days to have an impact in our lives today to help us make good life-affirming choices when faced with the challenges and changes confronting us.

I also share this because I want to reconnect with each one of you after our over two years of being somewhat asleep and now are beginning to awaken… most of us now able to leave our homes and go out to restaurants and visit family, and travel on planes… although we are hesitant and unsure and still sometimes wear masks and prefer to avoid large gatherings and crowded spaces. We aren’t out of the woods or the nightmare yet, but there definitely is a feeling of moving toward more freedom and movement.

Like our ancestors who moved from slavery to the wilderness there also is this uncomfortable time as we take on new responsibilities and awareness of our part in caring for the sick and the poor and refuges and the war-wounded, and choking environment and the melting icebergs, and the enslaved, trafficked, abused of all nations…

and just like our ancient ancestors who at moments of crisis demanded that Moses take them back to Egypt, the known and safe place, we too sometimes sigh and hunch our shoulders over the enormity of what needs to be repaired, fixed, helped, healed, and our pitiful inability to take it all on. There were 42 stops recorded in the wanderings of the Israelites, showing that no life trajectory is straight toward the Promised Land, and that there were battles won and battles lost, mistakes, plagues, loss, and also inspiring, mystical, grand moments of awakening to new possibilities of working together to create a compassionate and ethical society.

Let us support our very active Social Action Committee and bring in non-perishable foods, and also support MAZON which is the Jewish Response to Hunger as their mission. We may be fasting next week by choice, but there are so many who are forced to fast and really need to supplement their food supply at the food bank. So, although we do not have barrels outside this year, please PLEASE bring bags of food to put into our collection bin which is right in our lobby for this next week. Or make out a check to MAZON and put it in the bin so we can send all those donations in from the JCSVV at the end of the High Holy Days.

How do we deal with so many needs in our community? Where do we start? How do we cope? That’s where we are now, all of us, in this wilderness of overwhelming information and demands, but walking toward a goal that is both personal, communal, and global.

These are the High Holy days during which we check in to all aspects of our lives. We face the reality of our death at some point and ask how we have spent our precious days… and months… and this year of our lives till this moment.

During the hours of prayer and song and traditional questions crafted through the ages, we commit to preparing ourselves for a new year, more consistent with our deepest values of how we want to walk in the world. What footsteps are we leaving as a path for others to follow?

So, let’s focus together, rabbi and congregant and guest and fellow earth-walker, on awakening what is the best in ourselves and each other. Let’s spend these hours while together in the synagogue or participating from your homes, and also the in-between times during the Ten Days of Awe when we are separate, allowing ourselves to do the scary task of opening our eyes and awakening to the physical, emotional, and spiritual possibilities of expanded acting, feeling, and being that are the real work of this gift of time as the Jewish New Year unfolds.

**Rosh Hashanah morning - day 1, Monday, September 26, 2022**

In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Sages, it says that while we can never complete the huge tasks of repairing the world, neither can we avoid beginning in some way. We cannot be asleep and unaware of the needs of people in our community and in the wider world family. We must shake ourselves awake to recognize mistakes made by us or by our leaders, and in the world of Action, Assiyah, without defending or explaining, we can choose to focus on how to improve ourselves and help others In this congregation and in our community. We have so many opportunities to make a difference: with donating food, supporting homeless shelters and housing projects, collections of summer survival kits, school supplies, neighborhood green bags, teddy bears for children in crisis or hospitals or simply displaced and in need of comforting…simple acts like calling each other at times of loss or illness or just to connect. So, when we get overwhelmed, just say to yourself that we can’t do everything, as I quoted in Pirkei Avot, but also cannot avoid starting the task. Those of us studying **Mussar**, the Jewish character refinement process, have learned that we have to draw on courage and faith and honor as some of the characteristics that enable us to act and make a difference despite doubts and fears that are natural.

We give this day significance: *Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom*. The pages in our Machzor, the High Holy Day prayer book, are an indication and guide, but we need to ask: How are you giving this day significance? The day would pass with no effect at all if you didn’t attend, participate, give it value.

We can be lulled by the lovely singing of our small but mighty choir under the direction of Katherine LaTorraca who accompanies so many of our sung prayers. But these are not just pretty melodies, they carry the spirit of our prayers to those places that can only be reached through music, both in the high heavens and in our deepest hearts.

Perhaps there is one line in all of this morning’s liturgy that jumps out at you as if you had never heard it before, with new meaning, as if in a spotlight. What is it for you?

For me this year, I see so many instances of a directive to wake up and be present, to see more, be more aware. This year I take nothing for granted. Many of us have had losses, either of loved ones, or perhaps physical capabilities, or illnesses, or lessened memory. It can lead to frustration and even despair, when we feel we are just not the same as we once were in our abilities. So, now we are presented with the opportunity now to wake up to our new reality and opportunities. Maybe we have always helped others and now we have to ask for help. That’s a huge change, but we have to wake up to that necessity.

In our review of this year, we have to be very honest with ourselves.

As we are slowly emerging back to something that is not yet “normal” or “the way it used to be” what can we do to recreate connections to new members, new friends, new ways of reaching out?

This is not an easy task, but I invite each one of you to take time this week outside of synagogue services and **write to me about what efforts to connect you are making now and perhaps where you simply cannot do what you used to and are seeking alternative ways to be part of community. I will gather these messages and anonymously share them on Yom Kippur.**

**Let me repeat that – Please send me emails about where you are waking up to how you may not have fulfilled your best intentions; where you feel you cannot find the avenues you are seeking, and how you are awakening to new possibilities of connecting to community this year.**

In a basket in the lobby, I have placed small Books of Life to fill out, with questions about our actions in the past year and our intentions for the new year. It is a chance to recognize the hurts we may have felt or caused, and the steps to healing that are open to us.

I pray that each of us will be written in the Book of Living Fully, since we cannot know what is in store for us in the ultimate Book of Life.

*L’shanah tovah.*

**Kol Nidre, Tuesday, October 4, 2022**

Kol Nidre, what touching music that brings tears to our eyes. We are grateful to Tom Hoisch for bringing us his beautiful cello rendition and to Cantorial Soloist Marden Paul for singing that haunting melody with its ancient words. Kol Nidre opens the heart and gets us into another state of receptivity, layered on the years and years and years of hearing the same melody, but each year having a new spark of meaning that touches us in a different way.

We wake up each morning to a new day and we awaken each Yom Kippur to a new way of realizing where we have fallen from our goals. We reflect on how very much we are sorry for things we didn’t say or do in time, all the missed opportunities we cannot regain. And we resolve to do better and not make promises or vows that we cannot keep or were prevented from keeping despite our best intentions.

Life got in the way, and this is one way of saying it.

The words are in Aramaic, and the translation is problematic. It says that **the vows, promises, obligations, penalties, and oaths from this Day of Atonement to the next shall be released, annulled, made void and not binding. But we actually understand it to mean the vows from last year to now that we couldn’t fulfill despite our best intentions would be wiped off the books.**

It is a legal formula rather than a prayer…. perhaps used by people in history forced to convert but feeling terrible and having to practice Judaism in secret. In any case, let’s take our promises seriously, and let the melody touch our hearts to soften our self-criticism over what we intended to complete and simply could not.

We want more time, and we never know the ultimate timing of our lives. Do you have a bucket list of things to accomplish besides seeing exotic places in the world, or throwing out the first baseball at the World Series or meeting a favorite famous person of stage or sports? What’s on your soul’s bucket list that is written in the deepest drawer of our heart?

To make a difference in the life of a little boy or girl from a difficult home situation?

To repair the rift in your family or with an old friend after years of separation and estrangement?

To find a way to be calm instead of angry when triggered?

These are the kinds of actions that create a worthy list that doesn’t drop into a metal bucket with a clunk to be checked off but gets written on the finest silky threads of our spirit.

Take a moment to settle into a space of comfort and ease where you can allow that little guiding voice to suggest one word or phrase that wants to be added to your spirit list for the coming year. See that word or phrase printed in front of your mind’s eye as it imprints itself in your heart and memory … and then slowly fades away, leaving you with a very positive and eager sense of your goal. Later, write it down, maybe in the little Book of Life we are handing out to everyone who comes, and can send to anyone who asks for it.

Kol Nidre, all our vows, our intentions, may they lift us up to new awakenings in this coming year. May you be written and sealed in the Book of Living Fully.

**Wednesday, October 5 - Yom Kippur Day**

When things get too familiar, we kind of do them automatically, but aren’t fully wake. It is impossible to maintain the same awareness and intensity of attention for each word, phrase, prayer, during services! The beauty of the repetition is that the light will go on at different times, and you’ll pop open to something you never noticed before and it will open up in you a new chapter and make you smile or cry or see with new eyes. At the end of this long day as the sun moves in its arc from the east to the west and we see the shadows change in our synagogue, we will journey from who we were to a new level of awareness, both as individuals and as a community.

Here are some honest reflections of where you have regrets or cannot find new pathways or solutions:

**Read some excerpts from the notes:**

*Sad about estrangement with grown children, a wall of silence between us, and hoping to rebuild relationship with them. It is very painful to be an erased parent.*

*In the past year, I have been guilty of passing judgment when I didn’t have all the information, been hasty and impatient in traffic, gotten angry about something that’s not in my control and lashed out at people who didn’t deserve it. I have neglected my own health for some odd excuse or another when in reality, I just didn’t want to put in the effort. I have opened my mouth and said things I should keep to myself. I haven’t lived up to my own impossible standards and expectations, then I beat myself up for it.*

*I read the NY Times nearly every day and feel depressed by the world's entrenched challenges. I am sad at a broken relationship with a child and hope for a repair at some time. Looking to refind my sense of joy that I had as a young person. I intend to invite that joy back into my life.*

*Sadness at the rapid decline of a parent but glad to be able to be present in whatever time is left.*

Here is what several of you wrote about the way you have found to adapt to this new re-emerging from isolation but not yet full normalcy, and some of your aspirations for the new year:

**Read other notes:**

*In this coming year, I am living life from new possibilities rather than being constrained by what happened in the past.*

*I think I’ve grown leaps and bounds this year. I was able to honor promises made a decade ago, repair my friendship with my ex-husband, become closer with my son, let go of a lot of anger and resentment for things I can’t change and replaced it with acceptance and wisdom. I am more able to show compassion and tolerance for people and things I previously wouldn’t. Working on building a new life, a new career path, a new perspective.*

*In this year of 5783, I am focusing on writing a new story for my life, turning pain into purpose, and building pathways to peace.*

*My wakeup is that somehow although my intentions are there, I do not follow thru. One for this year: no more snacking after 10 pm and no cookies candy etc. before noon.*

*For the coming year, I have strengthened my resolve to always try to be kind and loving to my loved ones, and people, in general.  At the end of one's life, that is what you will remember- the loved ones in your life and your relationships with them.  I also want to try to increase my Jewish learning, because as the Torah says, one can find peace and happiness by following its precepts.*

Some of you may be watching other synagogues’ services from the east to the west coast or in Israel, on the screen of your computer. But all of us are joining together with the same prayers asking forgiveness and offering our own release of grudges and hurts. We are all awakening to the importance of our own voice and strength of our own two hands, and whether we can run, walk, or use a walker or a wheelchair, we are all journeying through our space and time as fellow travelers, balancing the need for safety and protection with the need to reach out and matter, making some ripple in this great ocean of humanity.

At the end we will have mourned our losses together and read the words that assure us we have been heard and forgiven, and then will make affirmations of how we wish to show up. Let this be a year of waking up, of awakening, of shining our light through the darkness.

May we all be written in the Book of Living Fully in the coming year.