

Canttor Ida Rae Cahana Rosh Hashanah AM 2024/5785 Sermon

“Saying L’Chayim! In the Face of Change”

Everyone these days listens to podcasts. They reinforce or challenge our devoutly held political stances. They can enlighten and inspire us with cultural, political, and historical insights. Podcasts can be therapeutic with the likes of Esther Perel or Brene Brown. For me, I listen to a combination of all the above and mostly turn to “Good Food” on my dog walks for the simple pleasure of being in the company of other foodies. Last week, I heard Yotam Ottolenghi talking about his latest book, *Comfort Food*. At this time when so many of us are living with heightened fear and anxiety about our futures, let’s think about the question, “What gives us comfort?” Memories of sitting around the table with family and friends at holiday times. The care taken with all the preparations, the anticipation of seeing those we love who are not with us enough, the taste of family recipes, the dad jokes, even the predictable arguments. Surprisingly, for chef Ottolenghi, it is not necessarily the foods of childhood, although they count. He urges us to also try new comfort foods from other places and recognize in these unexpected tastes the same feeling of “AHHH.” He defined comfort food as the act of cooking and eating something delicious in a way that is repetitive and controlled in an environment removed from the background of anxiety and fear. Take that in with me as I repeat his definition of comfort food: “the act of cooking and eating something delicious in a way that is repetitive and controlled in an environment removed from the background of anxiety and fear.”

I have been thinking about how this service, these High Holidays, can provide us a similar kind of reassurance as well as an openness to change, even trying

something new, in the sea of anxiety around us. Our table this morning is set with the repetition of familiar prayers, sometimes with a little extra spiciness tossed in, in a beautifully curated environment of gorgeous white Torah mantles, expanded music, and beautiful bima flowers. Thank you to all the many sous chefs of CBI who make these High Holidays so soul-nourishing! Just as we loosen our belts a notch at a bountiful table, we hope these prayer experiences will nudge your gates of renewal to open a bit wider.

Cantors usually take the lead in choosing musical settings of the liturgy, although in our congregation, we are also blessed to have musically gifted Rabbis as our partners. We think about how to bring the whole service together; what musical threads and reflections help to introduce, accentuate, connect, pause, heighten, even thrill! The words of the liturgy set to different flavors of music hopefully engage all kinds of palates, to keep the food metaphor going. I am particularly taken with three themes of this morning's service which we have prayed together. They inspire us not just in this moment, but throughout the Days of Awe and into the year.

Our High Holiday prayerbook, *Mishkan HaNefesh*, has a myriad of readings to choose from. It can be overwhelming, whether you are sitting here as a first time attendee or you have been coming to High Holiday services since childhood. In the center, there are three resonant themes. Each one is announced by the sounding of ancient, gut pulling calls of the shofar. That first cry, called *Malchuyot*, proclaims the presence of the Divine Master Creator. If our fatigue or cynicism is getting in the way, hearing the shofar opens in us exquisite feelings of awe and wonder. A recognition of G-d, or for the G-d questioning, of the

universe's awesomeness. What naturally follows is the heart's movement to humility and gratitude. This is what the first call of the Shofar represents- "Wow! What a wonderful world! I am so lucky to be alive! AND, how tiny a part of this creation am I!" Later, we hear a second announcement from the ram's horn saying, remember! Remember who you are and where you came from, your family of origin, your chosen family, the whole human family. The cosmic exhilaration of just being alive leads us to the second theme, Zichronot; remembering you are not alone; gathering to mind all the others who guided you to this time and place. Finally comes the third blast, like that third time you call out to your child or partner, "wake-up time. Wake Up Time!! WAKE UP!!! A loving push out the door of the safety of this house to do the hard work in the days and weeks ahead. An insistence on dedicating ourselves to self-renewal and repair in our relationships as well as the world. The call of Shofarot opens our mind and heart to possibilities. It is an invitation to take a bite out of our one wild, unique life in a way we may never have imagined and then recognize there is a way to digest that uncertainty with a feeling of comfort. How? Allow these rich layers of themes and service experiences to be your guide, as I am embracing them to be mine.

Walking the path of my last year serving as your Cantor is ripe with many different emotions. Each B'nei Mitzvah service, each rehearsal, each Sunday school morning, each staff meeting (!), is layered with a sense of nostalgia even before I am at the end! I imagine you have experienced this same sense of, "Hmmm; this may be the last time I will do X." You may be far from retirement. Perhaps the fraught change you anticipate is a move from your home, sending a child off to their first or last day of school, changing jobs, graduating college, stopping having

your menses, starting medical treatment, adding a child to your family, grieving the death of a loved one. There are so many times in our lives where the road ends or takes a new direction, or sends us back for a bit. How we make our way through these inevitable changes depends on what self-appreciation we can summon in that moment, who supports us through the transition, and what possibilities we stay open to in our next chapter. Through this lens of life transitions, the Shofar themes hold a different power. Let's go back a moment...

The theme of Malchuyot refers to the One Divine Creator, but for now, let's regard ourselves as created in that divine image. Think back to your shining success moment-that time when you were happily confident and the world was your oyster! Feeling that youthful sense of awe at your unlimited potential! How we got to that place, most likely as a 20-something, was unpacked for me in "From Strength to Strength," by Albert Brooks. He explains the psychological concept of two kinds of intelligence.

Fluid Intelligence is "the ability to quickly solve new problems, use logic in new situations, and identify patterns. The exciting news for our younger folks is that Fluid intelligence peaks around age 20, but for those of us past our second decade, fluid intelligence declines with age. It is associated with what we know as short term memory [and the way it fades with age.]" I see the nodding of many gray heads like my own.

You may remember (or not!) that the second shofar theme is zichronot-literally "remembrance." As we age, we may not be able to make the fast and wide-ranging mental discoveries associated with fluid intelligence. Luckily, there is a second called crystallized, "accumulated knowledge you can recall as needed."

Crystallized intelligence is associated with long term memory. Experience, education, and cultural background all contribute to it. We may call this “wisdom” which increases with age as you gain life experience. The good news is that while crystallized intelligence also slows in adulthood, it can stabilize and continue throughout our life. American culture as a whole fetishizes youth and tends to mock or ignore the wisdom of later years. And yet, we all age; we all lose strength physically and mentally. At the same time, we retain the essential wisdom gleaned over years of experience. Change is inevitable but most change doesn’t have to be traumatic. I defined myself as one thing, a singer; now I am getting to know other sides of myself. Retirement can give us the opportunity to recognize other facets of ourselves which we may have never had the time or energy to explore. Moving can also do this. Divorce can do this. Birth can do this. Finding love can do this. Death can do this. Accepting our limitations while remaining open to new experiences and trusting our accumulated wisdom helps us to step over that next threshold.

It can be challenging to trust our own memories; fortunately we have others to fill in the gaps. We don’t tell our story alone – we sit at the table with all of our people around us. Even at younger ages, we see in children with siblings, close friends or cousins, how they weave together individual memories to create the whole multi-faceted story. Today, we are all sitting together at **this** magnificent table imbued with awe and humility, gratitude and remembrance.

We need others with whom we have shared joys and sorrows to help us remember the flawed and fabulous people we truly are. Today, we hold memories that are personal and part of our collective. Our communal memory

helps us fill in the blanks and reminds us of our responsibility to the future, our personal potential at every age, the precious future of the Jewish people and the hoped for peace this fractured world may yet find.

Which brings us to that last call of Shofarot, for which I would like to invite two more teachers to the table, one is a dear mentor and friend, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, and one I have yet to meet, the author Michiko Aoyama. In her book, "What you are looking for is in the Library," Aoyama wrote a series of vignettes connected by a mysterious research librarian who dispenses recommendations which have profound impacts. She asks a simple question to the individuals who stumble upon her, "What are you looking for?" Something in her presence, her calm, her tone, begs the deeper question beyond the hunt for a certain novel. Aren't we all longing to be advised, by a trusted friend, by divine inspiration, by a revered teacher-WHAT TO DO NEXT? WHO TO BE NEXT? Let us answer the Shofar call to awaken and hold that question now in our hearts, "What am I looking for?" Rabbi Hoffman teaches, "When it feels like life and the world we know is being destroyed, we respond with "L'chayim!" Choose life!

Indeed! What is the next crossroads approaching in your life to which you can respond, "L'chayim?" Let's try it together in response to some nuggets of wisdom from Aoyama:

1. "Until now, I have always thought of things in terms of whether or not they could be useful to me in some way. But that may have been my stumbling block. Now [that] I know the importance of the heart being moved, I have a list to try...[L'CHAYIM!]

2. My plan is to appreciate every new day. And take a wide view of things...[L'CHAYIM!]
3. I will not give up on myself...[L'CHAYIM!]
4. I intend to gather close all the things that are important to me. I will make my own anthology." ...[L'CHAYIM!]

Let these and all the other affirmations you are thinking about in this moment be your toast to the beginning of this New Year 5785. There will be one additional call of the shofar at the end of this service, signifying community and hope. Our children and families will soon join us to hear that last blast; witnessing the promise of a sure and bright future: little ones holding the hands of elders. In that sweet finale to our service, let us call out "L'chayim" as the last notes of the shofar fade.

One way or another, the act of sitting at the table together is a declaration of affirming life. That's what the set table is all about. That's what sitting here together today is all about. As we look ahead to the future, may the anthology we create be framed with "L'chayim!" So may we be inscribed and sealed in Life's Book for blessings! Amen.

