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Chadesh Yameinu K'kedem: Renew Our Days

As a rabbi, I often speak about how Jewish wisdom gives meaning to recent events. *Mah NishTanah Ha-Shanah Ha-zeh*: Why should this year be any different from all other years? But it is different. Each of us are struggling with the ongoing challenge and trauma of this moment. The pandemic has not passed – the distress and damage continue.

Iris McAlpin said it well: “This year has asked so many contradictory things of us. Fight for what you believe in. Surrender to what’s beyond your control. Be hyper vigilant. Relax. Stay hopeful. Grieve.”¹

We are exhausted. And we don’t even know what else could happen or what this next year will hold. So, what do we do? How will all of this change us? Well....Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!.....See you Next Year! We have come to the High Holy Days this year and things are different. Prayer feels different. Reflecting on our lives feels different.

The words and melodies of the Holy Days are the same, every year. These are the same words and songs generations before prayed to help them through their struggles. Our prayers at this season help us to reflect upon what is, rather than what we wish had been and will be. They show us an unvarnished, often painful truth, that our reality is not always the reality of our choosing. That we are not always in control. Nevertheless, we have the strength to kindle the light that will shine our path forward.

So many people have said to me - “Rabbi, I just want things to go back to normal.” Normal. Ahh....Remember normal!?! It was a time when we could go to our favorite restaurants, travel with ease, go shopping, and come to Temple and celebrate joyous moments with others. We lament our loss of “normal.”

Tradition tells us that the prophet Jeremiah wrote the Book of Lamentations after the destruction of Jerusalem and the forced exile of our people. *Eicha* - the book begins, “How,” How could this have happened? And the book concludes with the same lament that we have to go back to the “good old days.” “*Chadesh Yameinu K'kedem*” - “*Renew our days as in the past.*”²

The uncomfortable truth is that “normal” may not be a place we can get back to. And in the brilliance of Hebrew - the word, *k'kedem* - which means, “as in the past,” is also the verb - *Mitkadem* - which means to advance and progress - to look towards the future. *Eicha and Chadesh Yameinu K'kedem* are prayers that simultaneously expresses our question: how can we

¹ Iris McAlpine, Instagram Post.

² Lamentations

be mindful in this moment of our deep desire to get back what was good in our lives while moving towards what we can yet become?

What is happening right now will change us. Things *are* hard. Personally, I'm struggling with all of this too. Ana and our kids are struggling with all of this. Our parents and families are struggling with all of this. And things may even get more difficult.

It's so intensely tempting to cling onto the hope that things aren't what they seem — that the numbers of dead and sick aren't really so bad, that it's just a bad cold, that life will move on as usual once there is a vaccine.

Yet we know things aren't quite so simple. The pandemic has exacerbated preexisting social and economic inequities. It has furthered the misinformation age and the cancel culture wars. It has weakened community institutions - and our sense of trust in authorities. It has strained personal relationships. It has made us reconsider how good our past "normal" really was.

Post pandemic will be not be a return to normal, it will be the *new* normal. I have compassion for people that want to avoid - and sometimes even try to deny - this painful and complicated truth. It is understandable that so many people are struggling to accept or even see this new reality: Who say - either in words or deeds - *Chadesh Yameinu K'kedem - Renew our days as in the, past. Or, said another way, let's pretend that nothing has ever changed.* Because the grief that comes with acknowledging our losses is just so much to handle.

So, we do our best to take care of ourselves. We go on walks or exercise or meditate and pray. We read less news and more novels. We talk with a therapist or a commiserate with a good friend. We bake bread and watch a good movie. We go on, trying to make our lives "as normal as possible." It's extremely difficult to balance taking care of ourselves while not ignoring the world around us. This is the hidden message of *K'kedem*: We must lean in to our remarkable adaptability and desire for normalcy without allowing it to become blinding denial.

The Yamim Noraim- these Days of Awe - remind us that we, who like to be in control of our lives, are never fully in control. *Un'etane Tokef Kedushat Hayom - - Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by plague?* These words hit particularly close to home this year. The holidays encourage us to not wallow in despair at our lack of control but to use that awareness as an invitation to grow, to learn, and to evolve.

My teacher and friend, Rabbi David Stern recently said to a group of rabbis: "We live in a world where loved ones suffer, where our kids struggle, where pandemics come and hate spreads, where not everyone can afford to move to higher ground when life's storms come. Any faith worth its name has to reckon with the reality of that world."³ Rabbi Stern added, "Faith is not saying that the pain will magically disappear. Faith is not the Pollyannaish assurance of

³ Stern, David: CCAR Sermon Series – HHDs 5781

victory when agony is pervasive. Faith is about the discovery of our internal resources that we have yet to tap into. Faith is trust that we will not be alone..."⁴

By acknowledging the realities of our painful challenges, we can make space to discover our reserves of inner-strength, the resilience that helps us move forward and find meaning in this moment. We've done it before. From Assyrian, Babylonian, and Roman persecutions - to Roman exile, the crusades and the pogroms - to the inquisitions and expulsions, to the Holocaust. Our people have experienced plenty of dark and painful moments. And in each of those times, Just as we asked - *Eicha* - *How has this happened?* We also said: *Chadesh Yameinu K'kedem* - We will Renew Our Days, with the best of the past, as we lean-in towards the future.

Through each trial - we have chosen to live anew. To write poetry and music, prayers and rituals, to ponder philosophical questions and to live with joy and celebration. As Rabbi Klass spoke about last night: We certainly see this resilience in our congregation. It is in the volunteers calling to check in on people. It is the meal deliveries and financial support. It is the flexibility and creativity of b'nei mitzvah families and wedding couples. It is the new parents who bring a child into the covenant, the ultimate expression of hope for the future.

And it is the people who receive the hardest diagnoses and have to change their perspectives of what to hope for: For a quality of life that isn't painful. Or the ability to say, "thank you," or "I love you" or "goodbye."

Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem: We don't stop living our lives. We figure out how to have moments of celebration and joy. And to remember, and grieve our losses, even over Zoom.

Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem: Is also an invitation to consider how we can evolve and change towards the future. We may not be able to envision life on the other side of this just yet. That's ok. And we may be sad and angry at what could have or should have been.

But *Chadesh Yameinu, Kedem* - is also a question; "What am I being invited to learn?" Said another way: "What do I want to remember about this moment? What do I want my community to remember? What do I want my kids to remember? What role do I want to have played in this slice of history?"

By asking these questions -we will find open and creative answers we will find our resilience. We will bring meaning to an incredibly difficult time.

Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem: We are the bridge that links the past, the present, and the future. We will face the pain. And we will discover meaning, wisdom, and wholeness along the way.

Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem may we renew our days and may this be a better and sweeter year-- for us all.

⁴ ibid