

Renew Us Once Again

Erev Rosh Hashana 2019/5780
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Earlier this year I was invited to a 70s party. “Come in costume!” The invite read. You know me, presented with an opportunity for external transformation, I took it very seriously. I went down to Hillcrest to the *Frock You Vintage Clothing store*.

It’s a lovely store, neatly and expertly curated so that the clothes are hung in sections according to decade. I walked out beaming From my purchase of a 1973 sequined butterfly top to go over a black halter dress.

Now, I was a child in the 70s, so my understanding of 70s fashion had more to do with remembering what my mother wore (velour jacket, bell bottoms and loads of polyester) along with my dad’s moustache and side burns, and the wide collars of his shirts.

But as I looked around the party and we danced to the likes of KC & the Sunshine Band, Wild Cherry & Queen, it didn’t feel like La Jolla 2019.

Despite the return of some 70s styles today, I don’t long to go back to my awkward pre-teen years, but I understand nostalgia, and even a romanticizing of the past for what it might have looked like to my young eyes at the time – which admittedly – I don’t really remember.

As I tried on different options in the store, I knew I wasn’t *really going back in time* that isn’t possible, and yet, people said I looked just like Liza Minnelli at Studio 54 in NYC circa 1976.

Of all the messaging on the *yamim noraim*, this notion of returning to the days of old as part of the process of repentance is one of the most complex.

The liturgy beckons: *Hashiveinu venashuva. Hadesh yameinu K’kedem.*
Return us and we shall return. Renew us in these days as in the past.

Hashiveinu venashuva. Hadesh yameinu K’kedem. These words seem to encapsulate the entire message of these awesome days. We sing these words each Shabbat at the conclusion of the Torah service, but they come from the book

of *Eicha* – Lamentations - that we chant on Tisha b’Av, the day that we commemorate the most devastating day on the Jewish calendar, when the first and second temples were destroyed.

The basic meaning of the prayer in its context is clear. Return us to the days before the destruction of Jerusalem, before the loss of our sacred center. before we knew such anguish.

Hasheveinu Adonai eleyha venashuva – Return us, dear God, and let us return.
Hadesh yameinu kekedem - Renew our days as of old.

But what are we saying really? And how can the simplicity of this phrase speak volumes to us this year?

We come together tonight, carrying with us the hopes that our *teshuvah* – the turning and repentance we’ve done will release us from the past year, opening up the gates of potential for each of us. But opening them to where? Over these *yamim noraim*, I will be exploring this theme of Renewing. Our Days. As before.

The words may be simple, but I am not entirely convinced I know what I mean when I say them. What is being **renewed**? Which are **our days**? When is **as before**?

Tonight, I want to share some general thoughts about the phrase by way of introduction, and each day we are together will focus on one part.

Hadesh: to renew. Of all the three words, our community knows this one best. We are afterall, Dor *Hadash* – A **new** generation. When this congregation was founded 36 years ago, it had a vision for itself that was decidedly different than what had come before. It wasn’t just a new congregation but thought of itself as renewing the many ways of purposeful Jewish living, learning, and doing. More on this tomorrow.

But when I think of this word – to renew – I do have a sense that at the end of the year each of us individually and together as a collective seeks renewal and a re-ignition of what drives us. We are called to lean in to ups and downs of the last

year, how to move them or be moved by them, and how to gain perspective.

When we are young and hopefully unscathed by life renewing ourselves comes easily. Children absorb many experiences that at the time seem monumental and insurmountable. But they recover and rebound with renewed spirit.

Unfortunately, as we get older and experience the challenges that life has to offer, sometimes it becomes harder to renew ourselves. We start out ready to turn over a new leaf, and then we find ourselves right back where we began. Most of the time it takes an encounter with uncertainty to really make the process of renewal and return very real.

Hadash means that we pray to be revived with the wonder and enthusiasm of our youth - whether in body or spirit. It means that we seek to find the vigor of life we may have lost or neglected. When we are resigned to our current reality renewal seems out of reach. But the renewal of life is indeed the main spiritual theme of these holy days.

Rabbi Alan Lew taught: “In the beginning, God created us out of nothing. It’s all downhill from there, and that’s the partThat belongs to us – the long, slow return to nothing. But if we stop resisting it for a moment, it is precisely this return that can save us. It is precisely this return that can renew us...”¹

Rosh Hashanah proclaims Judaism’s revolutionary teaching that history and existence are not cyclical and static – but that human experience is *dynamic* and *evolutionary* – always progressing toward new heights and greater understandings.

We need not be bound by the limitations, patterns and regrets of the past, as there is always an opportunity to make a fresh start, and a new beginning. The liturgy and symbolism of RH has always pointed to the recurring theme that we are given the precious gift of new possibilities, if we would only accept it with gratitude.

Yameinu. Our days – renew our life and the length of our days. What are the things that make up our busy lives? And when we pray that *our days* be renewed,

¹ Rabbi Alan Lew: *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared.*

what exactly are we asking for? And even more pointedly, *which days*?

I once heard Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, talk about the challenge of spirituality vs. religion. As I have taught often about *keva* and *kavannah*, the fixed nature of ritual vs the fluid, changing nature of it, Wolpe called that the difference between religion and spirituality.

He quoted the naturalist Burrows, who said: “Do you want to see something new? Take the same walk You took yesterday.” When we think of all the things that fill our lives the people, encounters, relationships, even the synagogue community, We must remind ourselves, as Wolpe said, that life isn’t about enchantment, it’s about *re-enchantment*.

Everything that fills our days as wondrous as they may be, eventually lose some lustier. And we then have a choice, abandon them – the friend, the house, the car, the job, the synagogue – or recognize that everything that is truly valuable is constantly opening up before us, showing us new beauty each and every day.

Our days are all that we have. We can wish to go back in time – we can even think that the past was greater than the present. But didn’t we think *that* back then too, about the past before that?

What will it take this year to not harp on what we don’t have, what we haven’t achieved, what we don’t like, and instead, see the incredibly good fortune with which we have been blessed?

Hadesh yameinu – renew our days, re-enchant our days. Because the question isn’t whether life, the world, religion, entertains us all the time, but whether we are deep enough, mature enough, Holy enough, spiritual enough, to see the beauty that is already there.

Kekedem – As before. This is perhaps the most challenging word of the entire phrase. What before? Or should I say, before what? Sometimes we say, renew us *as in the beginning*, but the beginning of what? What are the days of old? And really, since we can’t turn the clock backwards, how do we, in a sense, go “back to the future”?

Are we saying we want to return to the days of Abraham and Sarah or of Moses – literally returning to the wilderness of wandering? Do we think that the time of the rabbis was somehow more secure than our day? Perhaps when we have been through challenging times, we want to believe that the past is somehow better than our present.

A few years ago, I read the *Little House on the Prairie* books to my daughters. I found myself explaining the world of Minnesota of the 1870s as if it was another planet, with life forms and practices utterly foreign to their young minds: log cabins, animal skin blankets, and churning butter to name a few.

Laura Ingalls Wilder did a masterful job describing the adventures of Laura and Mary, Ma & Pa and their coming of age, but I can't say *that* kekedem is appealing, even while I might sometimes pine for "simpler times."

But if we go back to the book of Lamentations let us imagine that the dream of the people was to be transformed, redeemed like their ancestors of old – who heard the voice of the divine, who experienced miracles, and who understood that the only way to get through the wilderness was to become a nation.

Think of our own reality for a moment. As we have navigated the political landscapes and landmines of immigration, climate change, racism, antisemitism, and gun violence in the past year, we might all wish to go back in time before these challenges were running like a low-grade fever, wearing us down day after day.

But isn't it true that whatever made a different era great for some people, rendered it difficult for others? How can we be sure that anything before today, was better than *this* moment?

Here's a simplistic example: There's a picture of me in a family album heading to my senior prom. I'm sitting on the couch with a huge smile on my face, but my younger sister is visibly crying – and not from tears of joy. She was jealous, she was the middle child, who knows exactly what was going through her mind right then, but clearly when I look back at that picture I see a happy 17 year-old girl. My sister likely sees something or someone else, and may never wish to go back in

time, except perhaps to tell her younger self to not be so upset. That her time will come.

So when we think of *before*, is it always better than now? And will what we consider *now*, always be better than *after*? What have we learned? What might we offer our selves of the past? How do we anticipate the future? *Hadesh yameinu kekedem* are like words spoken in a dream. The truth of course, is that we cannot go back. The past cannot be *literally* renewed, we cannot return to those days before, but we can pull forward the experiences of the last year and their importance to fuel our future. We can dream of the days to come in our desire to renew ourselves and the world.

In Psalm 126 we read, *B'shuv adonai et shivat zion, Hayinu kecholmim / We will be like dreamers when we are returned to Zion.*

To be in exile is to dream of home, to have hope is to believe that around the difficult bend possibility resides. The Psalmist continues: *Hazorim b'dimah b'rinah yikzoru / We who sowed with tears will reap with song.*

We live in a landscape of peaks and valleys. Our lives are filled with great joy and sometimes great sorrow. This is the meaning behind the Psalmist's words. We who experience suffering must also be able to rejoice. This is the meaning of *kekedem*. We seek the same hope for the future that our ancestors did, based on their history, their life and their faith.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of what would become the State of Israel, offered the teaching הישן יתחדש והחדש יתקדש - *ha-yashan yitchadesh v'ha-chadash yitkadesh* "the old shall be made new, and the new shall be made holy."

We can renew ancient spiritual practices and make them alive in our hearts and souls. We can (I would argue we *must*) look to the old ways to find sustenance in them – so that our new choices are grounded in the paths we have travelled before, even as we scout new roads. And we can also sanctify new ideas new teachings and practices, identifying the ways that the past can inform, change, and renew our lives. That's the work of spiritual practice writ large: making the old new, and the new holy.

As we begin a new year together, we are grateful for the renewal, the revival, and re-enchantment of our lives. We know that we will have to stand up to challenges that come our way in order to remain alive, for each of us has encountered or will encounter loss, pain, hardship, and real searching.

Nonetheless, we pray that as we make our way into the new year we will be able to say that we have arrived safely. We are here to live another year, to anticipate the future and give thanks for our past. We are here to renew sacred vision and with courage, to make the old new and the new holy.

The gates are wide open.

Hashiveinu – return to us,

venashuva – and we shall return.

Hadesh yameinu kekedem – let our days be renewed as they have been before.