



Rabbi Ken Chasen

“The Cool Springs of Hope”

Rosh Hashanah 5782 - September 7, 2021

Almost exactly one year ago, as we were drawing near to the arrival of the new Jewish year 5781, which ended last night, a member of our congregation stopped by the temple to bring me a gift. I wasn't there when he arrived, so I found this waiting for me (hold up “5780 Sucked” t-shirt).

I apologize if it feels a bit crass for this pulpit... but yes, 5780 sucked. Some things are actually better expressed indelicately. A year ago, we all welcomed the arrival of 5781 already six months into a pandemic. We knew the end was still far away, and yet we were ready, zealous for what the new year would bring. That is to say, we certainly never imagined for a moment that we would be gathering like this – again – to welcome the arrival of 5782.

Of course, there were some other things we also never imagined before 5781. We never imagined a violent insurrection waged upon on our nation's Capitol, ending our presumption of the peaceful transition of power that once secured our democracy and made this country a model for others. We never imagined seeing an unholy alliance of neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, QAnon believers – members of the vast, burgeoning right-wing network of militias and conspiracy theorists, rife with their love of fascism and their hatred of “globalists”... that is, us... savaging police personnel, desecrating our congressional chambers and offices, and threatening the lives of our elected leaders – while being openly aided and abetted by some of those very elected leaders, some of whom spew their own hatred of Jews and others with impunity.

Before 5781, we never imagined Jews being physically attacked just for being Jews outside an L.A. sushi restaurant – by a bottle-throwing, pepper-spraying, pipe-wielding, hate-spewing, Palestinian flag-waving caravan. And let's be clear – we are not talking about all those who wave the Palestinian flag, and we are not suggesting that it's not proper, necessary even, to speak out against Israeli policies and actions when they defy our Jewish values. This is a congregation that has never been timid about calling for and working for an end to the Israeli occupation. But when opposition to actions of the Israeli government serves as anyone's justification for verbally or physically attacking Jews, as happened numerous times here in Los Angeles and throughout the world this past spring, there is no name for that other than antisemitism.

Another thing we never imagined... raising our sons and daughters to take their Jewish values into the public sphere – to partner for justice across lines of race and faith and gender and socioeconomics – only to find themselves unwelcome or unsafe in progressive circles when they wouldn't declare Israel to be a perpetrator of genocide, when they objected to Israel's multiracial Jewish citizenry being classified as white colonialists, when their critiques of Israeli actions fell short of disavowing Israel's right to exist. These are the stories brought to me by our LBT college students – young adults we helped you to raise and to whom we feel responsible.

And all of this, amid a backdrop of libertarianism run amok, such that poor countries all over the world are desperate for vaccine shots that Americans, citing liberty over community, refuse to take, even when paid to do so. And meanwhile, the climate of the planet rises unabated, and the fires multiply, and the hurricanes become more ferocious, and the future is filled only with greater and deeper questions. Maybe I need a new shirt, now that 5782 is here.

5781 was a hard year to be a Jew. It was a hard year to be an American. And it was a hard year to be a human being. And as 5782 dawns, it is hard not to be demoralized – not to feel some measure of surrender, of fatalism about this moment of virus and violence and vitriol. In all the years I've served this congregation, I cannot remember a time when more of you have despaired about tomorrow. This is especially true of the youngest adults among us, who openly wonder whether it makes much sense to give us older folks the grandchildren we've always dreamed of... and also the oldest among us, who have seen plenty of human history, including some very dark times, but nothing quite like this troubling confluence of traumas.

In this country, we Jews are simply not accustomed, at least not recently, to this level of disquiet. So perhaps we can learn a thing or two from some fellow journeyers who are – our friends in the Black community. The legendary blues guitarist, B.B. King, once spoke about what it felt like to build a forward-looking life underneath the endlessly dark cloud of lynchings and discrimination and disadvantage. He said, "If you live under that system for so long, then it don't bother you openly, but mentally, way back in your mind it bugs you... Later on you sometime will think about this and you wonder why, so that's where your blues come in... because you hurt deep down, believe me, I've lived through it, I know. I'm still trying to say what the blues mean to me. So I sing about it."

Is that not exactly what has brought us here in the warm morning light of 5782? Are we not here, as a part of this beautiful congregation we love, to sing about it? To give voice to all those realities that don't bother us openly all the time, but which sit at the backs of our minds, causing us to wonder why? That is these Holydays – or it's supposed to be. We get to do that here... together.

The landmark 20th century author of the African-American experience, Richard Wright, wrote the following in his 1941 work, *12 Million Black Voices*: "Our

churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death." If your body is tired, and you have felt something of our wholeness and humanity slipping away, well, you have come to the right place. Come immerse yourself in the cool springs of hope.

Hope, you say? From where do you harvest hope at a time like this? And I say: from those who have walked similarly dark roads, or even darker... sometimes much darker, in fact... and whose lives have testified to the majestic power of the human spirit.

If we're looking for some kind of reasonable corollary for the magnetic draw toward despair so many are feeling in this moment, the closest we might get is 1968, a year that has inspired countless books and documentaries. Vietnam tearing a deep generational divide across the land. Racial and cultural tensions reaching a boil. The violent chaos of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. And of course, the back-to-back assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, the two men most commonly seen as the reason for hope.

With disillusionment and dread in the air, this congregation's Founding Rabbi, Leonard Beerman, of blessed memory, stepped to this very podium on Yom Kippur Eve, October 1, 1968, and spoke these words: "I believe with perfect faith that this time of turbulence is a time of great hope for (humanity); not for despair and cynicism, but for hope.

"I draw hope from young people all over the world and especially here in our own country. Yes, they are romantic and unrealistic and immoderate and unpredictable. They have respect for some of our ideals but they are justly suspicious of our ability to realize the values we have taught them. They are looking not for values to talk about but to live by... I draw hope from them.

"And," said Rabbi Beerman, "I draw hope from being a Jew, from being a part of a tradition that commands me to imagine a world of (humans) as it should be, that asks me to dream because there are still dreams worth having, and more than that to advance confidently in the direction of my dreams. Thoreau was not a Jew, but he once wrote a passage that many of us learned as school (children): "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

"This synagogue, the whole of Jewish tradition is where we turn to build castles in the air. Then we must go forth into the city... and there we must put foundations under those castles we envisage here."

One might wonder how this temple's rabbi could have been so certain of hope in a moment that felt so desperate to almost everyone else. But we must remember that Rabbi Beerman had his own sources of inspiration. He, too, counted upon those who had walked still darker roads and yet somehow remained bearers of light.

Every now and then, I am asked why we are Leo Baeck Temple. After all, we didn't start that way. This congregation was founded as Temple Beth Aaron in 1948, hiring a freshly ordained Leonard Beerman as its spiritual leader one year later. But in 1952, Rabbi Beerman asked Leo Baeck, the great rabbi who had helmed all of German Jewry during the Nazi reign, if he would consent to the temple being named in his honor – and in fact, he came to LBT for the dedication ceremony.

Baeck was much more than a great rabbi and theologian. He was one of the true heroic figures of the Holocaust. As a dignitary, he was offered multiple opportunities to escape Germany, refusing them all and remaining in Berlin until there were no Jews left there for him to serve. This landed him at the age of sixty-nine in the Nazi camp at Theresienstadt, where he was subjected to hard labor, pulling hearses that were used as food carts. Incredibly, he survived – something that cannot be said for many of his loved ones, for whom he sought and accepted no special favors. Baeck lost four sisters in Theresienstadt, and two brothers in a Nazi death camp elsewhere. And yet all of this barely scratches the surface of his story during the war, for Rabbi Leo Baeck saved lives in that camp by saving spirits. He was a pastor, performing funerals to ensure that each individual life and death retained honor. He performed weddings... in the camp... think about the message of that for a second. And most famously, he delivered lectures to audiences packed into freezing cold barracks late at night, such was the hunger for hope.

My teacher, Dr. Michael Meyer, published a new book on the life and thought of Rabbi Baeck this past November. It includes this remembrance of Baeck's lectures by fellow survivor, Trude Simonsohn: "Those two hours," she said, "were as if I were in a university and not a camp. You submerged yourself so much in the spiritual that you forgot you were freezing, that you were hungry and standing in an ice-cold attic." For his part, Baeck was similarly sustained by those he taught. He wrote: "Is there another such people on earth which has such a deep and true connection to the spirit that, although it is facing humiliation and danger, it asks for the word of the philosopher?"

The text of only one of Leo Baeck's concentration camp lectures survived, but oh, what a lecture it was. Entitled, "The Writing of History," Rabbi Baeck spoke these words to a packed attic of starving listeners on June 15, 1944: "For the Israelite-Jewish historiography, justice is the ultimate meaning of history. Were justice to perish, it would be meaningless any longer to live on earth... True history is the history of the spirit, of the human spirit, which may sometimes seem powerless, but which in the end remains superior; which survives because even if it does not possess power, nonetheless it possesses strength, strength that can never cease."

From where do I harvest hope at a time like this? From knowing that we stand in a long and unbroken chain of Jews who did not know what tomorrow would bring – and had good reason to worry in some cases whether there would even be a tomorrow – and who leaned upon the superiority of the human spirit. For even

when they did not possess the power to reverse the dangers that troubled them, they nonetheless possessed the strength that can never cease. And so do we.

I draw hope from our young people in this moment – romantic and unrealistic and immoderate and unpredictable as they are... as we once were. They are demanding their day to write the story of the human spirit, and even when they challenge or defy or reject our way, our answers, they provide renewed hope of unlocking the questions.

I take hope in being a Jew – in this tradition which has assembled us once again, even from separate domiciles, to issue its unrelenting new year's message: go and build your castles in the air, especially when the air is particularly dark, and never rest until you've placed foundations under them. For we are part of a people whose connection to the spirit is so deep and true that you're sitting in front of a screen right now, just so you can feel it brush across your soul and bring you into communion with hundreds, thousands, of fellow seekers who have answered the call of yet another year by asking for the word of the philosopher. Our bodies may be tired, yes, but we know where to find the cool springs of hope.

Most of all, I harvest hope from you – all of you – who have the blues and have come here to sing about it. I want to tell you that the year 5781, now ended, was one of this congregation's most inspiring. I watched you create community in too many ways to count – when you couldn't even leave your homes. I watched you provide comfort and cultivate joy. I watched you bring food to the hungry, deliver companionship to the lonely, give generously to the needy, and advocate for the disadvantaged. You submerged yourself so much in the spiritual that you forgot you were freezing. And this is why I have perfect faith that whatever the year 5782 may bring – even those things we won't have imagined – we will be ready to meet the moment.

This season is for summoning all those questions which sit at the backs of our minds, causing us to ask why – about ourselves, about our people, about our country, about our world. They're hard questions to ask, even harder questions to answer. To those questions, let the sound of the shofar point the way.