



# DVAR TORAH FIRST DAY ROSH HASHANA 2021 BY CARYN GRANEK

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,  
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,  
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,  
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,  
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

We had everything before us, we had nothing before us,  
we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way  
—in short, the period was so far like the present period,  
that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received,  
for good or for evil,  
in the superlative degree of comparison only”

These famous opening words of “A Tale of Two Cities” describe the conditions in England and France in 1775, the year the novel begins. Dickens points out that this description is very much like his own time – 1859. He hints at the universality of life – that there is nothing new under the sun.

The best of times was enjoyed by the ruling classes in both countries. They were out of touch with the common people who lived in intolerable conditions.

The words used in these paragraphs contrast light and dark, good and bad as well as hope and despair - a duality that is not only a theme throughout this novel but a theme that resonates through our lives right now. Dickens could have been writing about our times – what may one day become known as The Time of Uncertainty.

Rosh Hashana is known by many names - one of which is Yom HaZikaron - a day of remembering.

So let's think back and remember. Rosh Hashana last year was difficult. We had no idea that it would be so gloomy. The rising death rate from coronavirus around the world made the “who by plague?” line in the liturgy chillingly real and horrifyingly bleak. Millions were afflicted with illness, and some will always suffer long term implications. There was job loss and economic deprivation.

There was discontent on the streets. Divisions based on race, politics, border closures. Anxiety about climate change. Tension and anxiety about everything. Hardly a sweet Rosh Hashana.

Eighteen months later and we are in another not so sweet Rosh Hashana.

The ongoing separation from family and friends, from one another in this Kedem community and the significant life disruptions that continue to challenge us - looking forward to tomorrow is a struggle. Everybody has been impacted adversely: for eighteen months, our lives have been narrowed, curtailed, distanced. And yet this season of the Jewish year asks us to try to lift our heads and look at the bigger picture.

Yom Hazikaron – a day of remembering. The greatest adversities endured by the Australian people since Federation have centred on war, pandemic and economic depression. Each has been global in scale and the effects have echoed down to future generations.

How many of our childhoods have been shaped by the experiences of our parents – scrimping and saving after the experience of the Great Depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after the war experiences. Events of this scale do not come and go without altering normal life after the storm has passed.

Those touched by the Depression were frugal for the rest of their lives. Those returning from the second world war, or those who survived the concentration camps, suffered from what we now call PTSD but at the time they were not understood or supported.

Trials such as these change a nation and the values of its people. What is it that has enabled those generations to endure two world wars, the Spanish flu pandemic, an economic depression?

In all of these crises the same attitude gave all Australians a sense of purpose. They had a belief that they were part of something bigger than themselves – a belief in the idea of community and nationhood – and they had a sense of duty to defend the values so dear to them.

I want to suggest that perhaps the idea of personal sacrifice for the common good may have been prevalent. An old fashioned idea perhaps - just as religion has become an old fashioned idea today. However it is possible that religion also provided a powerfully binding force for those facing hardship violence and possible death,

In the seven decades or so since WW2 we in Australia have enjoyed peace and prosperity by and large. We have loosened our ties to the British empire and now proudly stand as an independent nation beginning to struggle with our identity and history.

We have retreated from religious dogma and are more likely to demand and expect prosperity in this life rather than sacrifice now and hope for salvation later.

Religious authority has lost its authority to unite us and so the question becomes: What will sustain us – what ennobling ideas will help us through these times of uncertainty?

Do we have the galvanising forces required to withstand this adversary determined to put us in our place and keep us apart?

We can talk about weapons of self defence – whether it be lockdowns or vaccines. But perhaps we need something more.

Yom Hazikaron – a day of remembering. Let's think back 76 years to 1945. What must it have been like to be a Jew approaching Rosh Hashana in 1945? The camps had been liberated, yet there was a growing realisation that one third of the Jewish people had been murdered. Europe was a wasteland of destruction. Beyond the Jewish dead, there were also countless who were sick, wounded, refugees, and displaced persons. The British controlled Palestine and they made getting there exceptionally difficult. Arab hostility to any Jewish presence was relentless. A large percentage of the world's Jews were frightened, broken, powerless, and homeless.

As Rosh Hashana came into view in 1945, the first nuclear bombs had been dropped just weeks before; hostilities had ceased, but Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed.

Had you told a Jew in 1945 what the Jewish world would be like at Rosh Hashana 2021 – even with all our fears and troubles – that Jew would have thought that you were conjuring up an unbelievable fantasy.

Here's our current reality: There are close to 15 million Jews in the world. Almost 85% of us live in freedom in either Israel or the United States. Compared to all historic measures, antisemitism – though still a significant problem – is relatively controlled.

The largest community of Jews in the world lives in the independent state of Israel, now approaching seven million Jews, comprising 74% of the population.

Last year the US News and World Report ranked the state of Israel as the eighth most powerful country in the world. The United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco and Bahrain have signed peaceful diplomatic relations with Israel which represents a critical turning point in the region - one that will make Israel more secure for decades to come.

In the Diaspora Jewish communities show an encouraging level of resilience. During these challenging times we, in Victoria are in good shape too - able to manage our destiny better than at almost any point in the past. There will always be anti Semitism but when the Premier of our state recently called it out saying: "Antisemitism is unacceptable and evil and we have a zero tolerance approach to that in our state" we have every reason to feel optimistic about our future security as a Jewish community.

The question remains however – how do we live in this world of uncertainty? Uncertainty, for many of us, is terrifying. It is a blank canvas onto which we can paint our fears.

Our leaders know little and cannot make promises. We cannot rely on them to inspire optimism, and yet what we most long for is to know that, despite all of the unknowns, we are going to be OK.

Our souls crave hope at a fundamental level because it is crucial to our survival. Hope offers us the choice to see beyond our current circumstances to something better.

How do we live in what is becoming known as “the new normal”?

There is one word that serves as an answer to these questions. It is HOPE.

Hope is a Jewish story. On this Yom Hazikaron we remember the journey of our spiritual ancestor Abraham. Our tradition tells us that he heard the call of the Divine to leave his homeland, to leave all that was familiar to him, and to go, with his wife Sarah, to a place they did not know. Abraham was told to leave all the things that were familiar to him – his land, his birthplace and his father’s house – and to begin a new kind of life – an uncertain life - in covenant with God.

For what purpose were they to begin this journey into the unknown?

The Torah tells us that it was “To become a blessing to the world.”

Genesis is about that covenant as it affects individuals and families. The rest of Torah is about the covenant as it applies to the life of a nation. The Jewish story, still unfinished, is about the journey from multiple forms of slavery to freedom. Our Torah is the template of responsible freedom, it is our constitution of liberty.

Yom Hazikaron. We remember another moment in the Jewish story. The Israelites finally fled slavery in Egypt, and Pharaoh’s army was chasing them. They reached the edge of the sea. There was nowhere to go. They were trapped, and afraid. Moses lifted his staff and the sea parted. A spectacular miracle!

The famous midrash, written some 1500 years ago offers a different version – less grand but more inspiring. The Israelites were gathered at the water’s edge, Moses lifted his arms... and nothing happened. Panic raced through the crowd. Then a man named Nachshon stepped into the sea, and kept walking. The waters rose to his knees, his waist, his shoulders, and the Israelites nearby stared in horror.

The moment the waters came up just over his nostrils, the sea parted, and the people rushed behind him, towards freedom. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah pages 36b-37a, Mechilta Beshalach 6)

In a moment of terrifying unknown – of uncertainty - faith and hope meant walking forward anyway. Feeling fear, doubt, even despair, but not letting it stop him.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “to be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair... Judaism is a sustained struggle against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet.”

It is no accident that so many Jews are economists fighting poverty, or doctors fighting disease, or lawyers fighting injustice, in all cases refusing to see these things as inevitable. It is no accident that after the Holocaust Jews did not nurse resentment and revenge, but instead turned to the future, building a new Jewish nation whose national anthem is Hatikvah, ‘The Hope’.

It is no accident that Judaism has been opposed by every empire that sought to deny people the freedom to be equal-but-different. It is no accident that Israel is still today the only free society in the Middle East.

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. There is no greater challenge.

Throughout history, when human beings have sought hope they have found it in the Jewish story. Judaism is the religion, and Israel the home - of hope.

Yom Hazikaron – a day of remembering. One last memory in the form of a story.

In January 1945, Chaskel Tydor, an Auschwitz prisoner, was forced by the Nazis to set out on the infamous “Death March” with thousands of other prisoners. As he was about to leave, Tydor was approached by an emaciated prisoner, who handed him an object wrapped in a rag. “Take it,” the prisoner told him. “I’m too sick to survive. Maybe you will make it. Take this shofar. Show them that we had a shofar in Auschwitz.”

Tydor survived the march through the snow to the town of Gleiwitz. From there, the shofar went with him to Buchenwald. It remained with him until he was liberated on the 11th of April, 1945 by the American army.

On Rosh Hashanah 1945, while on the boat to Palestine under the British Mandate, he blew the shofar for a group of young survivors – many, like him, from Auschwitz – in view of the Carmel mountain range. They were about to reach the Promised Land.

If Jews could blow the shofar with hope for the year ahead on Rosh Hashana 1945, then so can we. In this new year, in the face of turmoil and uncertainty, doubt and fear, in the world and in our own lives, may we choose to hope. May we live with hope.

Let us begin the new year with their determination – that tomorrow will indeed be better, because we will make it so. Shanah Tovah.

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