

Rosh Hashana Sermon 2017 ©
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From Light to Darkness to Light

Let me begin by asking for a show of hands. How many of you went out of your way on August 21st to experience the solar eclipse?

I did.

I even saved my glasses, see here they are.

So let me tell you about how it came about that I got to participate. I had been thinking about it, since it was drilled into us how rare this opportunity would be. I had been thinking about it, but I procrastinated and at first I did not get those special glasses. So there I was, on vacation in the Berkshires, calling every place that might have just one more pair, when I saw online that the local library in the tiny town of Stephenson NY, just a few miles from where I was staying, was having a 'viewing party'. They had **not** procrastinated, and they had plenty of those glasses. All you had to do was call and get your name on the list. Happily for me they not only had the glasses, they had a hookup to NASA TV so that you could also watch the full eclipse as it happened live across the country.

We Jews, I think you will agree, have a blessing for almost everything. Think of Teveye and the Tzar. So naturally I looked- is there a blessing for solar eclipse? The answer is traditionally **no**-but wait a minute, maybe there should be?

What we see in an eclipse are the creative powers of God and the wisdom of human beings which allows us to explain and predict the orbits and movements of the heavenly lights. How traveling at 3000 miles per hour light goes to darkness and then darkness returns to light.

But, as I said before, traditionally a blessing is not said for an eclipse - because the Rabbis considered it a bad omen for the world to see the sun darkened. I didn't consider it a bad omen because I knew it would last only a few minutes. If you saw the crowds gathered in those places where there was a full eclipse you heard them OOOOOOOO and AHHHHH when it got dark and then cheer loudly when it went back into the light.

So my thanks to the Stephenson, NY Library and the astronomy teacher who showed up with her 3D model of the solar system to explain everything to the kids and us grownups as well.

Now let me ask you another question. I'm pretty sure the answer is no - but I'll try. Is there anyone here who is 103 years old? Is there anyone here who knows someone who is 103 years old. (By the way we do have a member of our congregation who is actually 105!)(Margaret Meyers)

Why do I ask? Well, some of you may have noticed that the eclipse occurred on the same day as Rosh Hodesh Elul, exactly one month ago on the Jewish calendar, the month that asks us to begin to get ready for Rosh Hashana by doing some soul searching- by reaching into the darkest parts of our souls and bring them to the light so that we can begin to repent.

We were told that a total eclipse was a rare event and even here in New Jersey when it was 60 or 65 percent that's also rare. But even more special is the solar eclipse on the new month of Elul. It's only happened five times in the last 250 years and the last time that these two events occurred together, you guessed it, August 21, 1914, a 103 years ago. So if you are 103 or a 105 then you are lucky enough to have witnessed these occurrences twice in a lifetime.

When you think about it an eclipse is a short event we go from light to darkness to light in little more than two minutes.

But here's the thing. In that very same week an event occurred that has been the topic of discussion ever since when we saw our country fall into a different type of eclipse, into a shadow of darkness that I believe has still not been completely lifted.

And so today I want to talk to you about light and darkness and light and eclipses.

But before I tell you that let me switch gears for a moment.

Every year when Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur arrive I look out at all of you and I have two thoughts.

First I am so happy and grateful that you've all returned to be here with your friends and family and that I am honored to spend my 29th Rosh Hashana with you.

And second I ask myself is- why is it that we come in such great numbers today?

I think I have an idea. You see all during the rest of the year we are caught up in the hustle and bustle of daily life. We are so busy making a living that we have no time to really think about how to make a life.

Then, the summer winds it's way into fall, the new year arrives and something inside us makes us pause and ask ourselves: Why are we running ourselves ragged and what is the meaning of our lives?

A second reason why we gather I suspect is as Bob Merrill wrote and Barbra Streisand sang "People, People Who Need People (you all know the next line right?) if you want to sing with me, "are the luckiest people in the world".

And that is us. We are the people who need people. We need each other but over the course of the year we tend to forget that too.

Some of us remember a time not so long ago when we knew our neighbors the grocer, the pharmacist the crossing guard by name. But now it seems that all the people with whom we interact are strangers. In one generation we've gone from *Cheers* where -everyone knows your name- to *Starbucks* where, no matter how often you go you get the feeling they've never seen you before. And that is the best case because, really, most of the time we don't even deal with people at all. We deal with machines and technology and disembodied voices which instruct us to press 1 for English and 2 for Spanish and 3 for Yiddish before we give away our credit card number.

So today is a celebration of the idea that we need each other not just as people but especially as Jews. We are a small people, and if anyone needs each other, we do. This is an annual reunion with the Jewish people and with Jewish values the kind of values that we can teach to ourselves and the rest of the world.

Which is why we are ready once again to turn to each other and say Shana Tova. It was 21 years ago that I first suggested that we ought to take a minute or two in the year that now begins to greet each other with a happy and healthy sweet year. So in a moment I'm going to ask you to get up and walk around and wish a good year to the people sitting around you, my guess is that they have been sitting there for the last year and the year before that and the year before that and then to find someone who you do not know because we are blessed with new members and new visitors and with guests and are happy to be friends with all of you. So I'm going to give you a minute now to wish each other a Shana Tova a good and healthy year in this moment of reunion (one minute).

Darkness and light.

A third question for us today and an admission though you don't need to show your hands this time. How many of you at least once in awhile have trouble sleeping? I'll admit that I do and if you watch enough commercials on TV you'd believe that almost everyone else does too. Some people have trouble sleeping because let's face it, for some of us in this room because the older you get the harder it is to sleep. But according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine there are now a hundred million Americans of all ages who suffer from the inability to get a good night's sleep. What I'd like to suggest today is that the inability to sleep is not only a medical problem it is a spiritual problem too. And I would believe that there are at least two spiritual and existential reasons why we should find it difficult to sleep. I say at least two because you will think of many others as we go along.

The first one is simply stated anxiety: anxiety about the state of the world around us. After all today we keep repeating that this is the birthday of the world and so today we should pay attention to this world.

Have you heard for example of a woman named Manal Tamini? Do you know who she is?

The United Nations crowned her a human rights defender and a Palestinian super mom who wants nothing more than peace with Israel. That is until they recently found out that for the past two years, a full two years, every Friday she sends out a Tweet condemning the vampire Zionist Jews. That's right you and I are vampires and come next week on Yom Kippur her most recent tweet says that the only thing that we will eat or drink is the blood of the Palestinians. Well thankfully the UN woke up and took away her human rights crown.

Have you heard about the town in Switzerland where this past August right around the time of the eclipse the **Parodies Arosa Hotel** hosted this sign:

To our Jewish guests, you must go to the shower rooms and shower before you go swimming. If you break the rules we are forced to close the pool to you.

Jews singled out to go to shower rooms in a post WWII era!

Have you heard that not once but twice this summer the Holocaust Memorial in my home town was vandalized the second time when it's glass was shattered.

And have you heard about Charlottesville?

In the same week as the solar eclipse we saw our country fall under the shadow of the events there when we saw hundreds of white supremacists come members of the KKK and Neo Nazis marching with torches in their hands shouting the Nazi slogan "Blood and Soil" and the phrase "Jews will not replace us". As a community of Jews we felt a collective shiver go up and down our spines and as a community of American we felt that shiver too. Anti-Semitism and Racism marching together.

For the past several years you have heard me alert you to the concerns we have had for our brothers and sisters facing Anti-Semitism in Europe. Now it turns out it has been growing right under our feet. Some organizations have been on top of it but for most of us well these scenes from Charlottesville came to us like a blast from the shofar shouting to us wake up and pay attention.

Can I tell you now how disappointed I am as we enter this new year. I am disappointed because neither now President Trump or then candidate Hilary Clinton listened to any of the advice that I so freely handed out last year.

You remember we were in the midst of a Presidential campaign and each candidate spoke unkindly about the other so I invited them to our

Yom Kippur services and reviewed the Al Chet for the sin we commit when we are not careful with the words we speak. I asked them both to refrain from insulting and belittling one another and how disappointed I am that for some reason they did not listen to me.

And now this year I have come to realize that our tradition not only knows the power of words; how they can lift us up or cut us down. **What I now know is the power of words not spoken** . That too is the story of Charlottesville.

When the opportunity was there the words not spoken the absence of a clear commendation of white supremacists and Neo Nazis and Anti-Semites left us a divided nation as Americans and an anxious people as Jews.

No wonder I have trouble sleeping at night.

There is a second reason why I can't sleep and this has less to do with the anxiety of the world around us and more to do with you and me and our inner lives.

Let me assure you at this point that I will not leave us sleepless in Morristown. Before we end I am going to offer some resolutions to our sleepless nights. But you will remember the second reason because of the six words at the end of this story:

It seems that where was a fire one night at a convent, and several of the nuns were trapped on the fourth floor. They were praying for divine providence, to show them a way out of the fire, when one of the sister's shouted "we need to take off our outer robes and tie them together and make a rope so we can climb down to safety: And they did.

Later, as they were being questioned by reporters they were asked if they were afraid that the rope that they made might not hold up. Oh no they said and here are the six words: **old habits are hard to break** (repeat).

The second reason that we are sleep deprived is because- old habits are hard to break. Our society provides us no time when we are really off and when we can really rest. Do you know anyone today who can close their office door at five, go home and not have to think about work until the next day? Our texts and our emails demand instant answers every single hour of the day and night. Listen to this story.

I spoke to a woman recently who told me that when her son was getting married just as they were about to walk him down the aisle she noticed that underneath the tuxedo jacket he had not one but two cell phones. On one them he was getting the score of the ballgame and the other he was texting. This was while he was waiting to go down the wedding aisle. She took both phones away from him and said I will give these back to you after the ceremony and then she told me that he looked at her the way a baby would look if you took away their bottle in the middle of a feeding!

This is the second anxiety that should keep us up at night. That after all of our work and after all of our efforts 24/ 7 in the end Rosh Hashana wakes us up in the middle of the night and asks us, what is it really all about? We spend every waking hour so hyper connected - but to what? Most of the time we are connected to things that no more than trivial pursuits.

Old habits and even new ones are hard to break. Didn't we promise last year and the year before that we would slow down and spend more time on the important things?

Did we?

And now let me offer you Rabbi Nesson's two prescriptions for a good night's sleep. One in the words and the actions that we take in the world and one in the words and the actions that we take in our hearts.

I think you will find that you what I am about to say will be jarring.
That Hurricane Harvey came along at exactly the right time.

To be clear I do not wish on anyone the wrath of the winds and the rains of Harvey or Irma or Jose, and yet, just at the moment that our country felt so divided and we Jews began to feel as outsiders, our country was brought out of the shadow of Charlottesville and together in an overwhelming wave of people helping other people –strangers- blacks and whites and immigrants and rich and poor – and Democrat and Republican, in a show of humanity which demonstrated that we do need each other.

You all saw the so many stories from the hurricane. How people formed a human chain to carry a woman in labor out of her flooded apartment to get her to a hospital or a second human chain to carry an elderly man out of his car as the waters rose around him, how people who lost their own homes still went out to help others. Those stories and so many more. There was no them and us, there was just -we.

And then back in Charlottesville Susan Bro, the mother of Heather Heyer got up to speak at her daughter's funeral. If you didn't see it or read it, I recommend it to you. In part she said, “You asked me what can I do? The answer is - Find a way to make a difference in the world”. I can think of no more Jewish message, no more Jewish challenge for us in the new year than that. Find a way to make a difference in the world.

As Jews we can make that difference. First for us to find our voice in the time when others have not found theirs. I believe in the goodness of the United States, the country whose first President told us the Jewish community that this is a country where we give to bigotry no sanctions.

But the threat posed by fringe groups on the right and on the left who terrorize and threaten people who they deem to be including you and me, between you and me must be called out with no equivocation. When we speak out we bring light back to the world and we sleep better at night.

We speak out and we act out. We reach out to all those in need who have been battered not only by wind and rain but battered by the winds and rain that make them feel different in this country.

These are the Jewish values that were placed inside of our souls from the very moment of creation when we learn that we are created in the image of G-d. And these are the Jewish values placed inside of at the moment of creation when we learn that we are all descendants of Adam and Eve, so that no one can say my heritage is better than yours, and these are the Jewish values placed inside of us when we left Egypt. Twenty two times the Torah tells us to help the stranger because we were strangers, we know what it is like.

My second prescription is for our hearts. You remember that we came to shul last year with a long list of things that we promised to do differently. We resolved in our hearts to be better as husbands and wives and children and brothers and sisters when we left at the end of Ne'ilah last year we just knew that this would be the year when we would know what to say and know what not to say, what to do and what not to do. And then everyday life got in the way, it eclipsed all those priorities and we slid easily back into old habits.

Now we have the chance to do teshuva once more to bring light back into our inner lives. When we do that our nights will be restful and we will be at peace.

The challenge I put before us this year is moving from darkness to light. We do that by raising our moral voices.

We do that by acting to help those in need and those who feel disenfranchised.

We do that by returning to the best intentions inside of us.

The very first act of God when creating this world whose birthday we celebrate today was **out of the darkness Vayehe Or -let there be light.**

I wish us a year of meaning and strength, of understanding just how much we need each other.

I wish us a year of overcoming the challenges of the Jewish people and for all people.

I wish us all a year of many nights of restful sleep. Waking each day into a new and brighter light.

Shana Tova.

May we all be written into the book of life, health, happiness and light in the year that now begins.