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 Rosh Hashanah Evening 5768/2007
 Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

It had been a long day for Adam and Eve, that first day of their lives. Over the course of just one day, they were born, placed in the garden, given one rule, met each other, broke the rule, hid from God, were cursed and thrown out of the garden, and now...for the first time in their short lives, they saw the sun dropping in the sky, and the world becoming increasingly dark and cold. They watched helplessly as the color, warmth and light drained from the sky and the earth. And as far as they knew, that night was going to last forever.

They struggled for what seemed an eternity with their terror, their bitter remorse, battered by waves of devastation and of loss.

And then a bird chirped. Dawn came...at first pale and grey,... and then the sun rose. Imagine their emotions then: the relief, the laughter, the songs they sang and the dances they danced upon learning that night is not everlasting, that they were forgiven, and the world reborn.

Those first twenty-four hours of the human saga took place, according to the ancient Jewish sages,... today, on Rosh Hashanah. To experience that new dawn—the return of the sun and the rebirth of hope—is the purpose of this festival. That promise is embodied in a cluster of stories, all of which are woven together into the fabric of the Festival.

Our matriarch Sarah, unable to bear children throughout her life, was told on Rosh Hashanah that she would bear a son...at age ninety! We read that story tomorrow. Generations later, another woman, Hannah, also struggled with infertility, and finally on Rosh Hashanah conceived and gave birth to a boy who would become the prophet Samuel. We tell her story tomorrow as well. And Joseph, that annoying kid, whose brothers hated him so deeply that they sold him into slavery, spent twelve years in prison forgotten by the entire world, and then emerged on this day, and his light began to shine.

These old legends come to us out of our ancient past, and they have been cherished precisely because they speak eloquently of hope, of the possibility of a new beginning even after hope was lost.

Is there anyone here tonight who has no use for such a story? Some of us here tonight are deep in the land of grief and loss...waiting for a new dawn, but not sure whether it is safe yet to hope. And even those of us fortunate to be living in the sunlight at the moment, know the magnitude of the problems facing our society and our world; all of us struggle regularly with fears and sadness, and would welcome a reliable messenger with an optimistic message.

There is one further story of hope associated with Rosh Hashanah. A story not about a thing that happened, but an old story about a time to come...the time of the Messiah. Even more than the heartwarming stories of Sarah, and Hannah and Joseph, Jewish hopes have been lifted by the vision first described by the Biblical prophets, of a future world where the nations will at last lay down their weapons, for good. When human beings everywhere will finally understand that we are family, and sons and daughters of one God. What a marvelous, miraculous dawn that would be.

The shofar that we hear tomorrow morning is a miniature version of the great shofar that will one day sound announcing the Messianic age. Our shofar is a voice of hope.

But then what? We know that hope has immense power to mobilize us...to embolden us to act, to give our time, our energies, even our lives for the sake of a better future. But we also know...every single person here knows...that rising hopes inevitably are followed by disappointment. We know it from bitter experience.

We fall in love and for a time the world seems perfect...until the first shocking misunderstanding.

We give birth to a child, and she or he is perfect, until they tell their first lie.

We land a great job, and we are filled with pride and delight...until we make the first mistake, and are stung by the first words of criticism.

We surprise ourselves by reacting with generosity and maturity in the middle of a conflict at work or at home, and we think to ourselves: finally, I have grown up!...until one week later, or one day later, or one hour later, we find ourselves falling back into kindergarten consciousness.

Has anyone here not experienced these ups and downs?? If so, the rest of us don't want to hear about it!

And as a people, we Jews have allowed ourselves, from time to time, to hope passionately...to believe in messiahs, charismatic individuals like Bar Kochba and Shabtai Tsvi... and even 50 years ago, many Jews believed that the new State of Israel might be the perfect realization of all our hopes and longings. But there is no perfect society in the world, and Israel...though vibrant and marvelous...is no exception.

In our personal lives, and in our collective experience, life teaches us...at times gently, at times cruelly...not to hope too hard. And when things are going well, to remember that "this too shall pass."

Maybe this is why many of our people have been drawn to Buddhism, and its truly wise teaching of non-attachment. The 13th century Zen teacher Dogen Zenji, said: "Even though it is midnight, dawn is here; even though dawn comes, it is nighttime." The modern Zen master Shunryu Suzuki explains, "Nighttime and daytime are not different. The same thing is sometimes called nighttime, sometimes called daytime. They are one thing." We Jews can recognize the wisdom here. Reduce hope; reduce disappointment.

But tonight is Rosh Hashanah, the day on which Adam and Eve celebrated the sunrise, and on which Hannah and Sarah rejoiced in the new life that finally began to grow within them, and on which Joseph emerged from 12 years in prison. Shall we or shall we not open our hearts to these stories, and the hopes and dreams that they arouse?

Should we allow ourselves to hope...for a better world, for a more just society, for our own personal moral improvement...when we remember very well that we have hoped for all of these things before...and our hopes have not yet been realized?

The Jewish response to this question is not the Zen Buddhist response. Judaism in general and Rosh Hashanah in particular teaches a more dynamic, more paradoxical, more turbulent approach, which is expressed most eloquently in the cries of the ram's horn, the shofar.

The shofar we will hear tomorrow sounds a sequence of three blasts: First T'kiyah—a long, unbroken cry.

Then Shvarim/Truah: a series of broken blasts, heard as sighs or sobbing.
And finally another t'kiya...another long unbroken blast.

There have been many interpretations offered for that sequence, through the ages, but here is one for tonight: the first t'kiyah calls out: hope!! Then the shvarim/t'ruah sighs and sobs: your heart will break. And then the final t'kiyah sings: hope again!

Don't be afraid, says of the shofar, of breaking your heart. It will break; but it will heal, and you will hope again.

This is our way in all of life. In marriage, we allow ourselves to hope for a perfect union. But two imperfect humans will disappoint each other and the true test comes after the heartbreak, after communication has failed and trust has been broken. In successful marriages, heartbreak is followed by healing.

So too in raising a child.

So too in the struggle for social justice.

So too in the long and slow journey to Arab-Israeli peace.

So too, by the way, in the building of a synagogue community. And I tell you this tonight, on my fourth Rosh Hashanah as your rabbi. Hope comes first. Followed by disappointment. Followed by new hope, again. I will leave it to you to tell me where in the sequence we stand.

This path of t'kiya, shvarim/truah, t'kiyah produces a bumpier journey than the way of emotional equilibrium...no doubt about it. Is one better than the other? All I know is that this is our Jewish path.

We leap and fall, leap and fall. And leap again. We give our hearts in love, and as a result, we come to know both heaven and hell. We imagine the world repaired, and that vision leads us to disappointment, and to glory.

This, then, is our agenda for tonight and tomorrow, for this sacred festival of Rosh Hashanah. It is the agenda, incidentally, which is outlined in one final story...the ultimate story for Rosh Hashanah and for our Jewish faith: the story of Abraham and his son Isaac.

That story begins with God's promise to Abraham at the covenant between the pieces. God takes Abraham outside his tent and says to him: "look toward heaven, and count the stars...So shall your offspring be!" Then God disappoints Abraham, leaving his wife Sarah childless until his hundredth year. That long night ends with the birth of Isaac...whose very name Yitzhak captures that moment of transcendent joy and laughter. But the story continues. When it finally feels safe for Abraham to look to the future with optimism and hope, God breaks Abraham's heart again, asking him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. And there, on top of the mountain, with tears streaming from his eyes like rivers, Abraham sobs and cries out to God for help, and the angel speaks, Isaac is spared and hope, and the future, are restored.

The story is endlessly horrifying and fascinating. We demand to understand what kind of God puts his children through such an ordeal. We do not understand. But in the back of our minds...we recognize this God; this is the real God, of the real world. Our God promises us the future, and breaks our hearts, and then promises anew.

And we...knowing exactly what we are in for...we open our hearts again, and hope once more for a shanah tova, a good year, a year of health, a year of friendship, a year of peace. Ken y'hi ratzon. Please God, may this be your will.