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5787 Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon — Jonathan Kabiri, Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester

Shanah Tovah.

Three years ago, I packed up a life in Israel—the only home I had ever known—and moved here, to New York. First to Brooklyn, and then, more recently, to Westchester.

I thought I already spoke the language. I was wrong about several things.

Nobody warned me about small talk. In Israel, if a stranger asks how you're doing, they actually want an answer. Here, I have learned, the correct answer is always “good,” no elaboration required, and none particularly wanted.

Nobody warned me about the DMV, either. In Israel, when you take your driving test, the testing center provides the car. Here, apparently, you're supposed to bring your own. I did not know this. I found this out standing in the parking lot on the day of my test, car-less, which turned out to be the one reliable way to fail a driving test before it even begins.

And nobody warned me that the moment people here learn I'm Israeli, a certain number of them light up and say, “Oh, do you know—” So let me get this out of the way, right now: I do not know Motti from Rehovot. And I am going to need you to be more specific about which Cohen family in Jerusalem you mean.

In Israel, a stranger will comment on your haircut, your outfit, or what's in your lunch—uninvited, and usually while cutting in front of you in line. Here, the cashier says, “have a great day” and seems to mean it, and no one has ever once critiqued my sandwich. I've decided how I feel about this: I miss the honesty. A little.

Five months ago, my wonderful wife, Eden, and I welcomed our daughter, Leah. Which means I am now learning two new languages at once: American small talk and fatherhood.

I'm not sure which one is harder for me to learn.

Between moving countries and becoming a parent, I have become very familiar with the feeling of having one foot in a world I understand and the other in a world I am still figuring out. Nobody hands you a manual. You learn as you go. You make decisions before you feel ready to make them, because someone needs you to. And slowly, you learn that certainty is not a condition for beginning.

There are moments when we become especially aware that we are beginning something new. Walking into a new school. Starting a new job. Moving into a new home. Entering a sanctuary for the first time—or standing at its bimah.

At such moments, we find ourselves at a threshold. We know something about the world behind us. We know much less about the one we are entering.

But I know I am not the only person here standing at a threshold. We all stand at the threshold of a new year, of 5787.

And there is a word at the very beginning of our tradition that helps me understand what it means to stand here.

Bereshit. “In the beginning.”

Rashi, the medieval Torah commentator, notices something about the grammar of this word. He reads *Bereshit* as “in the beginning **of**” — a phrase that needs something to follow it, the way “the top **of**” isn’t a complete thought. It leaves you hanging until you say, “the mountain.” So, the beginning of what?

Rashi’s own point here is a careful, technical one: he’s using that grammar to argue that this verse isn’t laying out a strict timeline of creation. It doesn’t stand alone as a finished statement. After reading “In the beginning of” we still have darkness and chaos. “In the beginning of” does not resolve until God says: “Let there be light.”

I love that. The Torah’s first verse is a sentence fragment. Even our most precious source of meaning begins with something unfinished.

Beginning, in other words, is not always a clean moment: before, and then after. Sometimes we discover that we have already begun something, even while we are still trying to understand what is happening.

That feels very familiar to me this Rosh Hashanah.

We do not have to arrive at the new year with everything settled. We can begin while everything is still taking shape.

That is the threshold I want us to stand on together tonight. Not the clean threshold of moving from one room to another. Not the neat transition of crossing a national border. But the messy threshold, the one where we linger with one foot in the past while moving the other to the future. The one that leaves us unsure of how to take a driving test. In other words, not the threshold between a finished past and an empty future, but a place within an unfinished story. We cannot change everything that has already been written. But we do have some choice in what comes next.

Our tradition gives us a way to act on that choice. We call it *teshuvah*.

We often translate *teshuvah* as “repentance,” but the Hebrew more literally means “return.” Tonight, I want to think about that return through six movements: awakening, remembering, reflecting, apologizing, forgiving, and beginning again.

These are not six boxes to check, or steps we necessarily take in order. We may find ourselves moving back and forth between them. But each asks something different of us. So, let's take them one at a time.

The first movement of teshuvah: awakening.

The Hebrew word *Rosh* means “head.” Rosh Hashanah is the head of the year: its beginning, its point of orientation, the place from which the rest of the year takes direction.

And that image of a head makes me think not only about where we begin, but about how we pay attention.

That may be the first invitation of these High Holy Days: to pay attention.

Most of the year, our lives encourage us to move quickly. We go from one responsibility to the next, one appointment to another, one headline to the next. We answer messages while thinking about meetings, sit in meetings while thinking about dinner, and eat dinner while thinking about tomorrow.

We become very good at moving forward. But we do not always stop long enough to notice where we are going—or who we are becoming along the way.

Then Rosh Hashanah arrives and asks us to pause.

Where have we been this year?

Whom have we loved well?

Whom have we failed to see?

What have we been holding onto?

What is waiting for us to begin?

Awakening does not fix anything by itself. It simply lets us see — good or bad, easy or hard — what is there, what makes up our lives.

The second movement of teshuvah asks us to slow down and remember.

One of the traditional names for Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaZikaron*, the Day of Remembrance. We ask God to remember us, “remember us unto life.” But these days also invite us to remember—to look beyond the version of this year we usually tell — the version we post on Instagram and Facebook — and make room for what actually happened, what we started, what we finished, and what is undone.

We bring accomplishments we are proud of and conversations we wish had gone differently. We bring relationships that sustained us and losses that changed us. We bring hopes that came to life, prayers that remain unanswered, and questions we have not yet found the courage—or the time—to ask.

Some of what we bring is exactly what we hoped for — the accomplishment we worked years toward, the friendship that deepened, the risk that paid off, the person we became braver or kinder for having known. We're allowed to let that stand on its own, without immediately looking for the catch.

Remembering means looking backward on purpose. It means acknowledging that we were impatient with someone we love. That we avoided a necessary conversation.

It means staying with those memories for a moment, without immediately explaining them away.

Not all of this needs to be resolved tonight. Some of it may never be fully resolved. That is part of living a whole year inside a single, unfinished life.

Remembering does not ask us to close every open question. It gives us the opportunity to notice which ones are still open.

The third movement of teshuva takes what we have remembered and asks what we can learn from it: reflecting.

Remembering asks what happened. Reflecting asks what it meant.

Our tradition calls this *Cheshbon Nefesh*, an accounting of the soul. But this accounting asks for more than a list of what went right and what went wrong. It asks us to look at ourselves honestly, including the parts we would rather not look at.

The conversation we cut short might mean we were not as considerate as we like to think. The deal we closed might mean we have real grit — or that we cut a corner we are not proud of.

The same action can point in more than one direction, and reflection is where we sit with that, rather than reaching for whichever version lets us off easiest.

Reflection notices that our calendar made room for our obligations, but not always for our deepest values.

And it asks a question I want to carry into this year: What do I want from the coming year?

Fourth comes the one most of us would rather skip: apologizing.

An apology does not require that we have figured everything out before we offer it. It is not a magic word that erases what happened. It is a place to begin repair—the moment we stop defending ourselves long enough to say plainly: I was wrong, and I am sorry.

Who needs to hear those words from you?

What conversation have you been too ashamed to start?

This is where the threshold stops being only a metaphor. It becomes an actual phone call, on an actual Tuesday afternoon, to an actual person.

And it asks something of us.

It may ask us to give up the comfort of the story we have been telling ourselves about what happened: who started it, why we reacted the way we did, why the other person should have understood.

It asks us to be specific. To name what we did and listen to what it meant for someone else.

To say, “I was wrong,” without immediately adding the part where we were also a little bit right.

This work is real.

Our tradition gives us time for this work. The ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur make room for a process, a way to start an apology, not to resolve everything, but to try, not a single moment in which we are expected to say everything and make everything right.

All of that comes with us into the fifth movement: forgiving.

Forgiving asks two things of us: release the judgment that someone else's worst act is the totality of who they are, and release ourselves from being defined by our own worst act.

Toward someone else, it can mean sitting with someone in an uncomfortable silence instead of rushing to fill it with a joke, an excuse, or a glance at the door. It can mean hearing the word “sorry” arrive smaller and clumsier than we needed it to be, and swallowing the reflexive “it's fine” that would end the discomfort without actually accepting anything. It can mean holding eye contact the instant we feel the urge to look away, and saying, out loud, in a voice that might shake a little, that we are willing to move forward.

Toward ourselves, it asks the same discomfort turned inward, which might be the harder direction — there's no one across the table to keep us honest. It means catching the excuse before it finishes — the sentence that starts with “but” — and saying the harder thing instead: this is exactly what I did. I shouldn't have. I'm so sorry. *Teshuvah* insists on this in both directions: that none of us, not the person who wronged us and not the person we see in the mirror, is only the worst thing we have ever done.

None of this necessarily feels good while it's happening. It may feel almost unbearable - that discomfort could be the sign that we are doing something real, not performing forgiveness for our own benefit. And it takes more than getting through one painful conversation — it takes changed behavior, proven over time — before forgiveness becomes something lasting, and not just something we meant for one evening.

And sixth: beginning again.

To begin again is not to go back to where we started. We cannot do that. We know things now that we did not know then. We have lived this year. It has changed us.

But *Bereshit*, the story of creation, offers us an image of a beginning that is still unfolding—an unfinished sentence waiting for what comes next.

Beginning again means adding the next word: the next act, the next honest choice, the next attempt. We are not erasing what came before. We are taking responsibility for how we continue.

Reflection asked what I want from the coming year. Beginning again asks a harder question: what does the coming year need from me?

So here is what I hope we carry out of this room tonight: we are not finished sentences. None of us.

Bereshit, in Rashi's reading, is a word that asks us to keep listening for what comes next. And *teshuvah* gives us a way to take part in what comes next in our own lives.

We wake up and notice where we are. We look honestly at the year behind us. We ask what we have learned and what is being asked of us now. We say the hard, true words out loud. We consider whether an old judgment still needs to have the final word.

And then we begin again—not because everything is resolved, but because there is still life to live, still love to give, still work that needs us.

The old year has ended. The new year is beginning. We cannot know all that lies ahead. But we can choose a place to begin.

May we enter these High Holy Days with the courage to look honestly at the year behind us.

May we enter them with compassion for ourselves and for one another.

May we listen for the voices we have ignored, the truths we have avoided, and the possibilities we have not yet imagined.

May we find a way to return, even where repair is difficult and the path forward is not yet clear.

And as we cross this threshold together—as a community that can help one another find the next word—may we ask not only that the coming year be good to us, but that we might bring goodness into the year.

May it be a good and sweet new year—and may the sentence we begin tonight lead, in time, to light.

Shanah tovah u'metukah.