

**A NEW YEAR - NEW OPPORTUNITIES**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 2010/5771**  
**Sun City Jewish Congregation**  
**Rabbi Hillel Cohn**

*Shana Tova!* May each of you - may each of us - have a GOOD year. As we gather together tonight to usher in this new year our wish for one another should be exactly what the traditional Hebrew greeting of this season seeks: A GOOD year. While the more popular English translation of the traditional Hebrew greeting is “Happy New Year!” there is a good deal of wisdom in not wishing or seeking a “happy” new year but, rather, a “good” year. As a colleague of mine once said, “‘Happy New Year’ is a familiar old pagan series of syllables. The Rosh Hashanah prayer is that you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a *good* year - a year of goodness - during which, it is hoped, that the good person... will do good things for himself (or herself), his or her family, and friends, his or her congregation and community, his or her world. Then, whether or not life is good to him or her, this Jew will be good to life.”

This new year comes to each of us with new opportunities to make our days good AND to be good to life. *Shana Tova* - let it be this kind of a GOOD year.

Now I could share with you lots and lots of things that I believe make for a good year. There is no dearth of teachings in our vast collection of Jewish wisdom accumulated over thousands of years about what the *good* life is and we don't have to restrict ourselves to Jewish wisdom. There is an abundance of wisdom in the teachings of the great thinkers of all of human civilization, in the world's religions and cultures.

As we begin a new year we are reminded that there are at least two dimensions of life that need to be our concern. The first is our own individual life, our inner life, our souls. Our own individual lives, often complex and mysterious, includes by extension the way we relate to those closest to us, our inner circle of family and friends. The second dimension is our world, society, community. We are never apart from our world. Having a good year means that our own lives be good and that the world we live in be good.

There are, of course, other dimensions of life but let us especially think about these two.

A couple of months ago I think I came to understand better what at least a couple of things are that each of us can do to achieve a good year.

At the end of June Rita and I spent a few days in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. I had been invited to officiate at a wedding there and was delighted to accept the invitation - not just because it gave me an opportunity to officiate at a wedding of two delightful and talented young people and to share a couple of joy-filled days with their families but because it also gave us an opportunity to revisit Jackson Hole and its two notable nearby attractions: Yellowstone National Park and Grand Tetons National Park. Those few days were wonderful. They were relaxing, as they should be. They were exciting, as they should be. We experienced the sheer beauty of that part of our country. And it was during those few days that two verses of our Sacred Scriptures, the Bible, took on new meaning for me and directed me to thinking about what it takes to make for a good new year.

The wedding ceremony was held on a Sunday afternoon at the Jackson Hole Golf and Tennis Club. The golf course is acclaimed as one of the finest golf courses in Wyoming and the country. The setting is utterly magnificent. One looks up from the course - something I am told you are not supposed to do while actually golfing - and sees the gigantic Grand Teton mountains which even at the end of June are capped with large patches of snow. On that Sunday afternoon the sun was bright. The air was as clear as a bell. The huge mountains truly glistened. The *chuppah* had been set on the perimeter of the putting green of the golf course. The guests and the wedding participants were all treated to a most awesome sight. As I began the ceremony by invoking some of the traditional verses from the psalms that are recited at weddings, a verse welcoming the bride and groom who come in the name of God and seeking blessings upon them and a verse exclaiming that this is a moment which God has made and thus is a time for us to rejoice, I could not help but add that verse from Psalm 121: "I lift mine eyes unto the mountains, from whence shall my help come." The grandeur of those mountains was simply overwhelming.

That moment and that setting filled me with awe, with wonderment. And as I later reflected on that moment I could not help but think that one of the things I wanted and needed to say to you on this night as we wish one another a *Shana Tova*, a GOOD year is that to make it good, really good, for our selves, for each of us, we need to nurture our souls and that begins by not taking so many things for granted and appreciating the beauty that surrounds us. It is as simple as that.

A new year comes to us with new opportunities and new challenges and one way to make it a GOOD year is to appreciate our blessings, to cultivate or renew a sense of wonderment and awe.

During these High Holy Days, beginning with S'lichot and then on Yom Kippur one of the prayers that we recite asks that God hear our prayers. It says:

שמע קולנו - Hear our voices

ה' אלהינו - Lord, our God

חוס ורחם עלינו - spare us, have pity on us.

And among the verses of that short prayer is a verse taken from the 71st psalm. It says:

אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה, ככלות כחנו אל-תעזבנו - Do not cast us off in old age; when our strength declines, do not forsake us."

I remember when that verse was *davvened* at my congregation in San Bernardino it was *davvened* by one of our respected elders, a quite pious man. When I came to the congregation in 1963 he was already up in years. He sure seemed old to me. He was at least seventy or maybe even pushing eighty. He did not just seem old to me. He seemed ancient. When Barney Vaugall came to that verse he became engaged in a one-on-one conversation with the *Ribboine shel oilam*, The Master of the Universe. His conversation was much like that of Reb Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* who carried on a conversation with God. Barney cried out: אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה - God, DON'T cast me off in my old age. And he seemed to be saying "Don't let anyone else cast me off in my old age!" It took me a lot of years to understand the urgency of those words. It is for good reason that when we come to that verse now in our prayers that many of us find it particularly resonating. Each year as we get older it resonates even more powerfully.

There is a lovely commentary on that verse that says that what it really means is not just that we don't want to get tossed off, ignored or even patronized when we become old. It means: "Do not let my world grow old."

Seeing those absolutely breath-taking mountains in Wyoming in June made me so aware of the beauties of nature that I all too often take for granted. While I, like most of you, do not want to be cast off by anyone - family, friends, society - in these twilight years of my life, I know that what I must really avoid is letting my world grow old. And the way to do that is to renew a sense of awe and wonderment about the environment.

It is hard to do that when we see our once clean and pristine oceans and beaches tarred with the spill of oil. It is hard to do that when more often than not the polluted air hangs like a brown cloud over our mountains and valleys. But it is

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not impossible. And it should not take a trip to a great National Park to remind us of the wonders of nature.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, teacher, poet and peace activist, said it so well:

“People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child -- our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”

One way, dear friends of any age, for us to have a good year, a *Shana Tova*, is for us to appreciate anew the beauties of our world and that includes the beauty of nature and the beauty and amazing uniqueness of our fellow human beings of every color and temperament and ethnicity and language and faith. We have greeted a new year. Let us greet and grasp new opportunities. Just as we do not want to be cast off in our old age let US not cast off these opportunities. Let us not let our world grow old. By not casting off those opportunities we can nurture our souls and feed our inner selves and by so doing we can help make this new year a GOOD year. The Psalmist exclaimed: “I lift up mine eyes to the mountains - from whence comes my help?” As we lift OUR eyes to the mountains may we find our souls renewed. That will help make this a GOOD year.

But we are more than individual human beings. We are part of a world. We are connected to others through community and society.

A day or two after that wedding in June, Rita and I drove through some of the Grand Teton National Park and took a short boat ride on Jenny Lake. Some of you have been there, I am sure. It is an absolutely calming and refreshing experience. And I was set to savor all of it. There, too, the mountains were awesome. I recited the traditional blessing that a Jew is told to recite on seeing wonders of nature: Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, Author of creation. While I am not at all sure HOW creation took place and continues to take place I AM sure that what was created, in whatever way, is nothing short of miraculous. And when I behold something miraculous I find that my inability to find the right word to describe the indescribable prompts me to revert to the traditional blessings of Jewish life.

The description of Jenny Lake that you can get from the Visitors Center tells you that Jenny Lake was formed by melting glaciers about 60,000 years ago and is a beautiful blue mountain lake set in the heart of Grand Teton National Park. On the west side, the lake touches the Teton Mountain Range. The lake itself is about 260 feet at the deepest point. It is the starting point for numerous hiking trails including Inspiration Point and Hidden Falls.

As I hiked up the craggy pathway toward Hidden Falls I began to hear the rush of the waters. At first they were muted but as I continued the climb to the falls they became louder and louder. Indeed, waterfalls are, as one writer has put it, “magical places - places of solitude, of serenity, of subtle power.” I sensed all of those things as I made my way up to the falls themselves. And after about a half-hour of climbing up the path I arrived at the falls that are aptly named for they were hidden from sight until that moment. As I stood on a little bridge and saw and heard the sheer power of the water coming down what came to my mind was another verse from our Bible:

“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

It was there and then that I gained a new appreciation of the metaphor used by the biblical prophet Amos when he spoke those words.

And as that verse spoken by the prophet Amos thousands of years ago quickly came to mind I knew that there was something else that I wanted and needed to share with you tonight as we welcome a new year and seek to identify opportunities for making it an especially good year.

The new year presents us with new opportunities to live more justly, more righteously and that can only happen if our world - community, nation, society - become more just and righteous. Unfortunately rather than enabling justice to roll down mightily we have in too many ways allowed it to trickle down or even to dry up. We have done so by being unfair in our judgments of others. We have too often allied ourselves with others who want to impede the flow of justice, who demand justice for themselves but are not willing to grant the same justice to others. We Jews who throughout so much of our history have suffered because of prejudices, ignorance and stereotypes have perverted justice and fairness.

Of the many things that Jewish tradition provides for us, one of the most fundamental is a measuring rod for both our individual and our collective behavior. We need to determine our response to contemporary situations by asking

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ourselves: “Is it just? Is it right?” These are the questions we must ask as we confront the world in which we live.

Let me point to just a few examples of how this standard needs to be applied if we really want to make the new year a GOOD one.

The recent controversy about the building of a Muslim Community Center two blocks from the World Trade Center in New York is but one example of the need to ask the right question: “Is it just?” And the question is not just whether or not the Islamic Center including a Mosque should be built near Ground Zero. The even more significant question is “Is the way I am thinking about this just? Am I being fair? Is this right?”

Over the past few weeks we have unfortunately heard some of the most vitriolic commentary and some of it, much to my dismay, has come from Jews and from some Jewish organizations.

Parvez Ahmad, a Fulbright scholar and distinguished academician, has had to remind us that “Fears of terrorism and its erroneously perceived links to Islam are cited by detractors as their most common concerns. However, the detractors either ignore or are ignorant of the fact that those who perpetrate terrorism betray the teachings of Islam, which is why 9/11 has been unequivocally condemned by all major Islamic scholars, organizations and countries.” And then he goes on to say, “Linking Islam, a faith practiced by over a billion people worldwide, to the terrorism being committed by a handful of fanatical and misguided Muslims is absurd.” He correctly warns us not to succumb to fear-mongering about Muslims and cites a commentary in the New York Post that stoked such fears by stating, “Where there are mosques, there are Muslims, and where there are Muslims, there are problems.”

A Jewish organization to which I belong and which does wonderful philanthropic work on behalf of the Jewish Home for the Aging in Los Angeles contained an article by one of its leaders saying that, “The building or purchase of the mosques or cultural centers is funded by the bigoted Islamic countries.” It then says about Muslims, “they preach hate and diss the American values, denigrate our history and the struggles and goals *we* achieved - and the value of the individual’s freedom - all unknowns in the Muslim world.”

To engage in this kind of stereotyping and blatant bigotry is not right, not fair, not just.

A dear friend and colleague and current president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California said so well, “Islamophobia has reared its ugly head. All over our country people are talking about Muslims in increasingly hateful tones.... the language that is being used about Islam is often hateful and spiteful and yes, ignorant.”

And then Rabbi Eger says that “it is our ignorance of Islam that fuels this debate. This is being seized on as a way to continue to drum up fear. Play on our National In-securities. Play on the notion that there are strangers in our midst that would do us harm rather than Americans who practice Islam as their faith.”

Making judgments based on ignorance is what we call prejudice. Preserving canards and circulating stereotypes is NOT just, NOT fair. We Jews have, unfortunately, been subjected to those kinds of prejudices in the past and some are even existent today. The distribution of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* by the Dearborn Independent, financed by Henry Ford, decades ago and the rantings of Father Coughlin and Gerald L. K. Smith were not just, not right.

The standard which we should demand be followed by our communities and nation and which we ourselves should follow is “Is it JUST?” “Is it RIGHT?”

A statement issued on August 11th by 40 extremely prominent Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders says, “Fear-mongering and hateful rhetoric only undermine treasured values at the heart of diverse faith traditions and our nation’s highest ideals.”

It is not only the controversy about the Cordoba House that calls for the application of the principle of righteousness and justice. There are other current questions.

The recent decision by Judge Walker overturning Proposition 8 has evoked all kinds of responses. I, personally, am so pleased with his decision that recognizes the rights of gays to marry. For too long, I believe, gays and lesbians have had to deal with justice delayed and denied. The question is: Is it just, is it righteous, is it fair, to grant to all human beings the rights and opportunities that the majority of us enjoy? I believe it is and until that is recognized the mighty flow of justice will remain reduced to a trickle or even less than that.

We can and should apply the same standard to the question of immigration reform and to the many other questions of our times. Is it JUST? Is it FAIR? Is it RIGHT?

There are too many other areas where the flow of justice that needs to be powerful has been impeded and the end result is that life is not good for people of this country and of this world. And when it is not good for some it is not good for all. It is certainly not good for us.

If we want this to be a *good* year we need to be more sensitive to others and that includes to the laborers and to the poor and to the immigrants and to the people whose faith is different from ours. Obviously we must demand that WE be treated justly as well and that would include understanding that we Jews have a natural AND political right to sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

Over the past year I have often shared with you my appreciation of the writings of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire. Being Chief Rabbi means that he is orthodox and for that reason we have our areas of difference. But we agree on so much more. In a lecture that Rabbi Sacks gave a couple of years ago at Duke University and in a book that he wrote with the same title - "The Dignity of Difference" - he teaches so wisely that it is "only when we engage in role-reversal, when we see things through the eyes of the rejected, not the chosen, that we can abandon conflict and engage in conciliation." He calls on us to see the world through someone else's eyes, to put ourselves in their situation for only when we engage in that role-reversal and enter into the mind of the other can true justice prevail. Denying the humanity of those who are different from us is to reduce the flow of justice to a trickle or stop the flow altogether. It is that kind of justice that we must pursue and let it flow once again as mighty waters. The very name of that awesome waterfall in the Grand Tetons is an apt metaphor. It is called Hidden Falls.

Justice, my friends, is hidden from much of the world and we have contributed to hiding it. It is time to take it out of hiding and to "let justice roll down as the waters and true righteousness as a mighty stream."

The new year, the year that we hope and pray will be a GOOD year, presents us with many new opportunities to do just that.

While our years advance let us not allow our world to grow old. Let us lift our eyes to the mountains - and also gaze at the valleys and the plains - and



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appreciate their awesomeness. Let justice indeed roll down as the mighty waters as it was intended to be.

These are new opportunities that you and I have for making this what we really wish for, a *Shana Tova*, a GOOD year.