

“Were It Not For”

*D’var Torah* for Shabbat *Nitzavim-Vayeilekh* Sept 11, 2020  
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The Jewish calendar works on a nineteen-year cycle. It’s too complicated to explain in a short speech (or in a long one!), but sufficed to say that if September 11, 2001 corresponded to the 23rd of Elul, then nineteen years later it would also correspond to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Elul.

Nineteen years later would be today. And tonight begins the 23 of Elul. So we’re one day off, but pretty close. Which means that when the worst terror attack in history came to our own front door, we were precisely one week from bringing in the new year 5762, as we are now one week from the eve of Rosh Hashanah again.

Nineteen years ago, most rabbis I know, myself included, simply threw out their carefully prepared sermons and started over. What people needed from their rabbis at that moment was not theology, not history, not even “religion” in the traditional sense. What people needed was comfort and assurance.

I turned to the psalm that we had been reciting every day and night for three weeks, as we do every year at this season: Psalm 27. One verse of that psalm is familiar to most of us:

“One thing I ask from God. *Achat sha’alti me’et Ado-nai*. One specific thing do I ask. *Otah avakeish*. It is to sit in God’s home for the rest of my days; *shivti b’veit*

*ado-nai kol y'mey chayay*; to envision God's comfort, *lachazot b'no'am ado-nai*, and to visit God's protective place; *ul'vaker b'heichalo*."

I had intended to stop there. I had thought that this was all we needed to say. We needed comfort at the most profound level: "God's protective home." We needed to feel safe. And though most of the people in our congregation are not literalists when it comes to sacred scripture, we all appreciate the literal comfort of a physical community that shares Shabbat, holy days, communal rituals, and most especially, sacred space. Shared sacred space.

Shared sacred space, which is precisely what we cannot share now, and have not shared for over half a year. As scared as we all were in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attack, and as nervous as we all were for the survival of one of our own whose life was hanging by a thread, we nonetheless could feel the confidence that comes from gathering in a huge throng, singing softly and at the top of our lungs, reciting our millennia-old prayers, and basically reassuring each other that we had one another's backs. And that our deeply held principles were not nonsense.

That was our *beit ado-nai*, our "God's protective home," our *no'am ado-nai*, our sense of divine comfort.

But it was not quite enough, and it still is not quite enough. Beyond comfort, we need to believe that things will get better; that what brought us into darkness will loosen its grip on us and allow us to find our way to the light. That goes for the

darkness of terror, of climate, of political and social crisis, and certainly of deadly virus.

That belief – that things will get better - is harder to come by than comfort. It was true then, when we had what turned out to be the luxury of congregating physically. It's perhaps truer now, when we cannot see or touch one another; when we cannot safely embrace one another or dry one another's tears, or properly tend to one another's ailments.

So in my sermon of 2001, I then turned to the final verses of Psalm 27. They present a sobering ellipsis using the Hebrew word *luley*, "were it not for." *Luley he'emanti lir'ot b'tuv ado-nai b'eret Chayim*, "were it not for my belief that I will see Godly goodness in the land of life..."

And then the Psalmist abruptly ends the sentence and closes on a slightly more upbeat note: "Hope, then, in the Eternal; strengthen and encourage your heart; and hope in the Eternal."

As if to say, "I'm not really sure I believe that things *can* get better, much less that they *will*. And before I say as much, I had better stop myself and tell everyone to hope for the best. And did I mention "hope for the best?" *v'kavey el ado-nai?*

Not comforting? True, but it's honest. And it's hopeful. *Kavey el ado-nai*. "Have *tikvah*, deep-seated hope." Let *tikvah* govern everything you do and say. Let it govern your actions and relationships, your decisions and your responses.

*Luley zeh*, were it not for that...

Well, I wouldn't want to say. Enough to say that nineteen years later, our beloved member of the community and his family are thriving, and the world is still here, and we still have the courage to find ways to sing our songs together and do the healing work that we need to do.

Someday we *will* be able to recreate the Godly, comforting space that the Psalmist seeks. For now, there is something bigger, which is hope itself. We don't know what will be, but we commit ourselves to going there together full of hope.