

DisembArking:
Rosh HaShanah Day 1
Rabbi David Russo

Shana tova!

When late night host Stephen Colbert returned to having a live audience for his show in June, just a few months ago, he began his opening monologue, saying:

“I am so glad that quarantine restrictions have been lifted.

It’s the only reason that I can be with you tonight, my wonderful live audience.

As nice as it is to be emerging from lockdown, there are a few down sides.

For instance, here in New York, to-go cocktails and alcohol delivery ends today.”

The crowd loudly began booing.

And Colbert announced: You see, New York - the people want their boooooooooze!

I know that it might sound strange, but I have been feeling this tension presented by Colbert a few months ago.

On the one hand, there is so much to be grateful for right now as opposed to where we were one short year ago.

One year ago, when barely any of us could gather.

In some ways we are channeling the Book of Psalms (133:1):

Hinei mah tov umah naim, shevet achim gam yachad.

How nice is it, that we are able sit together.

With thanks to the incredible scientists, health care professionals, and public servants who created and disseminated groundbreaking vaccines.

And in particular, with thanks to our health and safety committee here at Anshe Emet, who have put in extraordinary amounts of time and dedicated their expertise to making sure we can be here safely together today.

It is in stark contrast to last year, when Marsha and I and a dozen or so others led a service on the second floor in front of a series of cameras.

What a difference it is, to see so many of you here, to hear your voices. And for those who are participating from home, we want you to stay safe, we feel your presence, it is as if you are right here with us, we simultaneously miss you, and are so glad to have you here.

In some ways, we are worlds ahead of where we were last year at this time.

And yet, in other ways, it feels like we may be getting closer to where we were a year or so ago.

Many of us are returning to feelings of fear and uncertainty, with the delta variant and recent surge in COVID cases.

And in some ways, the uncertainty and middle place we're in can feel even more difficult than when we were in lockdown, and at least our world was more clear cut.

Just when we thought that things were starting to inch, even if slowly, towards "normal", that reality seems to fade farther into the distance. Now I began thinking about this sermon and jotting down notes as early as May, and writing more and more in June and July.

I began writing this as our world was opening up.

And of course, people plan, and God laughs.

It's astounding how much things have changed again in these few months.

We are now in a place of limbo, and I imagine there will be a lot of shutting down and reopening this year.

As I watched that standup piece from Colbert a couple of months ago, I felt like he really hit the nail on the head in describing this transitional period we all find ourselves in.

This past year and a half, our community and people throughout the world have witnessed unimaginable pain - people who have died, lost jobs, been separated from their families, who have been more isolated and alone than they ever could have imagined.

Our clergy, staff, and community have comforted those in mourning, supported those suddenly in need of financial assistance, and cared for people who have been suffering.

I am so proud of what we have done, and what we continue to do.

And as I was writing this sermon over the past few months, I wanted to share a Rosh HaShanah confession for all of you, something that I have been struggling with for some time, and will probably continue to struggle with.

I am finding it hard to return to normal.

I feel guilty about this.

All through COVID, people across the globe longed for a sense of normalcy, a return to our regular lives.

And yet, even as parts of our previous life have now begun to resume, it still feels strange and new.

I, and imagine many of us are struggling to “go back”; to leave our quarantine cocoons; to function the way we used to, as though nothing happened.

This in no way compares to the challenges, losses, and pain that so many have been living with over the past year and a half.

But these feelings are real, and they’re challenging, and I know that I’m not alone.

I have spoken to many of you about this.
I find it hard to go back to what our lives used to be like.
I've liked being home at night more to put my kids to bed - even if it means having another zoom meeting at 8:30 pm.
And even while I am a loud extrovert - I know this is shocking to all of you - I haven't minded having more time that is quiet with myself and my family.
I haven't minded having fewer plans on the calendar, and more time to just be.
And what I didn't realize is that I'm not the first Jew in history to feel this way.

In a few moments, we are going to recite the Musaf amidah.

And in that prayer, we will read *zichronot*.

Zichronot means, remembrances.

In this prayer, we read a collection of verses from the Hebrew bible. One of these quotations reminds us of a familiar biblical character - Noah (Genesis 8:1).

Vayizkor elohim et Noach.

God remembered Noah, and all the animals, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subside.

During the flood, Noah and his family are effectively in quarantine.

He, his family, and the animals were by themselves.

Locked inside their boat.

They were in each other's business 24/7, with animals underfoot and nowhere to go for a change of scene.

And they were surrounded on the outside by chaos, danger, and even death.

Not the same as our situation, but pretty close.

A few months ago, I heard a brilliant teaching from a colleague and friend, Rabbi Aaron Potek.

The Torah says a few simple words (Gen. 8:17):

Tzeh min hatevah.

God tells Noah - leave the Ark.

God tells Noah and his family and the animals that they can go back to normal life.

But our rabbis notice these words, and say, they must be there for a reason.

Why did God have to tell Noah to leave?

Didn't he want to burst out of the Ark at the first possible opportunity?

Rabbi Potek pointed me to a statement of one rabbi from around 1,500 years ago, Rabbi Yehuda Bar Ilai.

He said:

אילו הייתי שם - if I had been on the Ark,

הייתי שובר את התבה ויוצא לי משם - I would have broken down the door to leave the Ark!

When the waters abated and it was safe to leave, why did they sit there?!

I imagine that, if I read this statement pre-covid, I would have said,

Yeah, I'm with you Rabbi Yehuda Bar Ilai!

What is Noah waiting for?!?!?

Enough of the smelly animals, being cooped up with the same people, not being able to go anywhere.

And now, there is part of me that says, I don't know if I'm ready to leave the Ark.

How many of us have been able to read that book that we love, finish a puzzle that we never used to have time for, binge a new TV show, or just stay at home in our PJ's, and know that NO ONE is judging us? When someone invites you to social plans, and you're just not in the mood to go, now all you need to say is - sorry, I can't, because of COVID!

Or, how many of us had something go wrong at work, or forgot to do something for a friend, and pretty much all we have to say in response is, sorry, but you know, COVID!

Or been able to go travelling to local sites in Illinois or Michigan or Wisconsin, finding newfound outdoor natural beauty?

Or done Zoom tours of museums and sites around the world that we otherwise never would have seen?

Now that we've adapted to our new circumstances, what will it be like to leave our safe spaces?

Life, unfortunately, does not get easier for Noach after he leaves the Ark.

He plants a vineyard, he gets drunk, his sons find him passed out and naked.

And we never hear from him again.

Rabbi Potek points out the painful reality of reemerging.

That transitions are difficult.

It is so easy for us to turn to coping mechanisms, whatever those may be.

But what we all need to understand is - transitions take time.

We need to slowly rebuild.

In the zichronot prayer about Noach, I am noticing a three step plan that can help us in the coming year, as we will likely go back and

forth between leaving the Ark and entering it again, and one day, eventually, leaving it for good.

The prayer says regarding Noah:

- 1) *Leshachet kol basar* - We acknowledge that Noah's world was destroyed.
- 2) *vatifkedehu bidevar yeshua* - we were assured with words of redemption, of a better future.
- 3) *verachamim* - and with compassion.

Step 1: We acknowledge all that we have lost.

We can't reemerge until we acknowledge and let ourselves feel the pain of what we have lost, whether we have faced devastating losses during this time, or the more mundane losses that all of us have experienced in some way - we still have to acknowledge what we have gone through and grieve.

Step 2: We begin planning our steps ahead.

Whether it is leaving the Ark to a more open world, or retreating to the Ark for a sense of protection.

We plan to safely move forward, with an eye towards the future we want to create.

That doesn't mean replicating what our lives looked like before the Ark, but it means planning for the way we want to live our lives from here forward.

Step 3: We move forward with compassion, recognizing that this is hard for everyone.

We all experience this moment in different ways.

Some of us may be like the Rabbi Yehuda bar Illai, ready to burst out of the ark.

And others may be more like Noah, sad or scared to leave.

What have we learned about ourselves this year that we can take with us into this new chapter of our lives?

What do we want to let go of? What were the parts of our pre-pandemic lives that we don't want to resurrect?

This year, I imagine that there will be a number of times when we may have to go back into the Ark, then leave the Ark, only to return to it again.

May we, like Noah, find the strength to take our next steps onto dry land, planning our steps ahead.

And may we, unlike Noah, give ourselves the time and space we need to find ourselves again.

Tzeh min hatevah - during this coming year, as we go in and out of the Ark, let us do so compassionately, looking out for one another, every step of the way.

Shanah tovah.