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 Congregation Beth Israel
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 “Building the Future We Cannot See”

I've been thinking a great deal lately about the future, how impossible it is to predict, and how we have to prepare for it. Twenty-five years ago, my father, Rabbi Sam Joseph, was here at Congregation Beth Israel, for the first time, leading a retreat on leadership.

Meanwhile, I was three thousand miles away, living a very different life than the one I live today. I was a lobbyist in Washington, D.C. My days revolved around congressional hearings, coalition meetings, and the rhythms of Capitol Hill.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I went to work expecting an ordinary day.

You know what happened next. The planes. The smoke. The confusion. The fear.

Like thousands of others, I was evacuated from my Capitol Hill office. Suddenly Washington became a city unlike anything I had ever experienced.

I actually lived on Capitol Hill, so a colleague, who lived in Maryland, took me away with them. And while we drove away from the city, I will never forget the large traffic sign over I95: Washington DC Closed.

For my generation, there is an entire way of thinking about the world that exists only on the other side of September 11. Before that day, the future seemed predictable. After September, 11, for me, everything felt different. The world had changed. And perhaps what was most unsettling wasn't simply what had happened. It was realizing how completely we had failed to imagine it. The day before, none of us knew. We were not prepared.

I've found myself returning to those words again and again over these past twenty-five years. None of us knew. We were not prepared.

None of us knew that a weekend on leadership at Beth Israel would become a footnote in a story none of us could yet tell. None of us knew that I would become a rabbi. None of us knew that twenty-five years later, I would stand on this very bimah, serving this very congregation, where my father had stood. Life has a remarkable way of refusing to follow the script we write for it.

Perhaps you know that feeling. Think back twenty-five years. Could you have imagined the lives you are living today? Who could have predicted the people you would love? The children or grandchildren who would enter your lives? The careers and marriages that would begin, or end? The illnesses that would come. The joys that would surprise you. None of us knew.

And if the last few years have taught us anything, it is that the pace of history has not slowed.

None of us knew there would be a global pandemic that would empty this sanctuary and move our prayers onto computer screens. None of us knew that October 7 would reopen wounds many Jews believed history had begun to heal. None of us knew that antisemitism would become so visible once again in our neighborhoods, on college campuses, in our politics, and even in our daily conversations. None of us knew.

Rosh Hashanah begins with that same humbling truth. We gather tonight at the beginning of another year. We have beautiful prayer books. Magnificent music. Ancient rituals. The blast of the shofar. But what we do not have is certainty. Not one of us knows what this year will bring. Not one of us knows what joys await us. Not one of us knows what heartbreak lies ahead.

And that's why we're here. The liturgy itself refuses to pretend otherwise. It asks us to confront the fragility of life and it reminds us that time is precious. It invites us to consider not only the length of our lives but the depth of our living. And yet, I think we sometimes misunderstand what the High Holidays are asking of us. It is tempting to imagine that Judaism's answer to uncertainty is certainty.

That if we pray hard enough...If we repent sincerely enough...If we become better people...Then perhaps we can somehow control what happens next. But that has never been our tradition's promise. Judaism has never promised us certainty. Instead, it offers something much more demanding: Responsibility.

Listen carefully to the sound that will accompany us throughout these holidays. The shofar. It contains no words. It offers no predictions. It tells us nothing about what the coming year will hold. It simply interrupts us. It wakes us up. Wake up, not because you can control tomorrow; wake up because tomorrow is coming whether you are ready or not. Wake up because the future is not simply something that happens to us, it is something we help shape.

That is the first great teaching of Rosh Hashanah. Our tradition is not certainty. Our tradition is choosing responsibility in the absence of certainty. That has always been the Jewish way. Our ancestors rarely knew where history was taking them. Abraham left home without seeing the destination. Sarah laughed because God's future seemed impossible. The Israelites stepped into the sea before it split. Again and again, our tradition reminds us that revelation rarely comes with a roadmap. Instead, it comes with an invitation: Take the next faithful step.

That is why I keep thinking about my father being here twenty-five years ago, speaking to this congregation about leadership. Neither of us could have imagined that I would one day stand here. Neither of us could have imagined what Beth Israel would experience over the next quarter century. Neither of us could have imagined what the Jewish people would face. And yet, looking back now, I realize something. The purpose of that leadership retreat was never to predict the future. It was to prepare people to meet it.

And that, is exactly what Rosh Hashanah is asking of us tonight. Not to make promises or resolutions to control or predict the future. But to become the kind of people who will meet it with courage, with faith, and with one another.

Which raises the question: If Rosh Hashana isn't about controlling or predicting the future...then what does it ask of us? I think the answer is found in one of the greatest leaders our people have ever known, Moses.

Moses spends forty years leading the Israelites through the wilderness. Forty years. He confronts Pharaoh, he parts the sea, he climbs Mt. Sinai, he settles disputes, he comforts, he challenges, he inspires. And then, at the very end of his life, he climbs Mount Nebo, looks across the Jordan River...and never enters the Promised Land. It's one of the most heartbreaking moments in all of Torah.

My colleague told me a story about leading an adult Torah study. Week after week, one participant came faithfully. She wrestled and argued with the text and celebrated the victories. Like so many of us, she became deeply invested in the story. Then she reached the end of Deuteronomy and Moses dies. He never enters the Promised Land. The student was devastated. She turned to the Rabbi and said, "Wait... that's it? Moses doesn't get to go in?" "No," the rabbi answered. The student was so upset that she never came back to Torah study.

I understand that reaction. We want the hero to cross the finish line. We want the one who sacrificed the most to enjoy the reward. We want the story to end the way we think it should. But Torah insists on telling a different story. And perhaps that's because we have the wrong definition of success.

Judaism doesn't remember Moses because he reached the Promised Land. Our tradition remembers Moses because he prepared a people to enter it. Moses devotes his entire life to a future he himself will never experience. His greatness was not that he arrived; it was that he spent his life building a future he knew would belong to someone else.

I believe that is one of Judaism's deepest definitions of leadership: building a future you know will belong to someone else. Leadership is not getting to enjoy every result of your work. Leadership is loving the future enough to help build it anyway. That's true for parents. It's true for teachers. It's true for rabbis. It's true for congregations. It's true for all of us.

The Talmud tells the story of Honi the Circle Maker, who was walking along a road when he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi stopped and asked him, "How long will it take for that tree to bear fruit?" The old man answered, "Seventy years." Honi was astonished. "Do you really expect to live another seventy years to enjoy its fruit?" The old man smiled and replied, "When I came into this world, I found carob trees planted by my ancestors. Just as they planted for me, so I am planting for my children." That is one of the most beautiful examples of responsibility I know. We inherit blessings we did not create, and we are called to leave blessings we may never see.

Think about the people who built Beth Israel. They built this sanctuary – someone chose the blue hotdog motif for the dome 😊. They established our cemetery. They created our school. They endowed our programs. Like Honi, they planted trees whose shade they knew they would never sit beneath. They weren't building Beth Israel only for themselves, they were building it for us.

And let's be honest, those builders are no longer with us. Some of their children and grandchildren remain connected to Beth Israel; many do not. The world has changed. For much of Jewish history, Jewish life naturally revolved around Jewish institutions. Today, thank God, we live in a different world and Jews have opportunities our ancestors could never have imagined.

And yet, even Jews who are barely connected, hope there will still be a rabbi and a synagogue when they need it. When they fall in love and want to stand beneath a chuppah or when their child hopes to become b'nei mitzvah. When they lose someone they love and need Jewish community to offer comfort. When the world suddenly feels frightening and they long to be surrounded by Jewish community. We count on synagogues being there for the moments that matter most. But synagogues do not simply remain. Every one of those sacred moments depends on generations of people who chose to invest in a community they believed would outlast them. The synagogue is never simply inherited, it is renewed, or neglected, one generation at a time.

And now the question comes to us: Will we do the same? Because Jewish community can no longer assume its place at the center of people's lives; it has to be earned. We have to build a congregation they cannot imagine their lives without. This is the work of our generation.

Honi understood that, he wasn't planting a carob tree for his own children, he was planting it for people he would never meet. For the entire community. Judaism has never understood the future as belonging only to our biological descendants. It belongs to all of us. Every Jewish child who walks through these doors. Every adult who discovers Judaism later in life. Every Jewish family searching for belonging and community. Every person who finds meaning here. The Jewish future is not someone else's responsibility because they happen to have Jewish children or grandchildren. It is a shared responsibility, entrusted to every one of us.

And now it is our turn. I know that phrase can sound heavy. "Our turn," almost like a burden. But I don't hear it that way. I hear it as an extraordinary privilege. At a moment when antisemitism feels more visible than many of us ever imagined... at a time when Jews wonder what Jewish life will look like for the next generation...at a time when the easiest response would be to become hidden... Judaism asks us to do something profoundly countercultural. It asks us to invest more deeply. Not retreat, invest.

I think about this all the time because I'm going to be your next Senior Rabbi. Leadership has been part of the conversation around my family's dinner table for as long as I can remember and I've come to understand that it has everything to do with helping people face the future together. My role, as your leader, is not to predict the future of Beth Israel, my role is to help this community prepare for it. And that is work none of us can do alone.

Because moments of healthy transition – like this one -- are precisely when communities should ask their biggest questions. We, Congregation Beth Israel, have the gift of preparing; we are not in crisis, and we have the opportunity to ask who we are called to become together.

That is why, over these High Holidays, we are engaging in a strategic planning process. To be honest, I hesitate to use those words because they sound so... institutional. It sounds like flip charts and spreadsheets, mission statements and committees. But, I hope you'll hear something much deeper. What we're doing is something profoundly Jewish. We're asking the question that every generation before us has asked: What does Beth Israel need to become so that Jewish life flourishes here, not only for us, but for those who come after us? What kind of Jewish community are we called to become? What will Beth Israel look like twenty-five years from now? What kind of courage? What kind of welcome? What kind of learning?

Somewhere in this sanctuary tonight sits a child who may one day lead this congregation. Or teach in our classrooms. Or chair our board. Or sing from this bimah. Or bring their own grandchildren here for the High Holidays. They are depending on us. Even though they may never know our names.

I want you to talk about this around your dinner tables, with your friends and family, between the apples and honey, I want you to ask: Why does this synagogue matter?

Starting now, everyone will have an opportunity to help write that next chapter. If you're a member, you will receive an email with the congregational survey. If you're joining us tonight but aren't a member, we want to hear from you, too. There are QR codes for the survey available for every person who considers Beth Israel part of their Jewish story, whether you've been here for fifty years or this is your very first visit.

Many of you will be invited to participate in focus groups and community conversations. I hope you'll say yes because this congregation belongs to all of us. The future of Beth Israel should not be imagined by a handful of people sitting around a conference table. It should emerge from the wisdom, the dreams, the questions, the hopes, and yes, even the disagreements, of an entire sacred community. You are doing more than checking boxes, you are adding your voice to a conversation that began almost 170 years ago and, God willing, will continue long after we are gone. That is what shared leadership looks like. And that is how we become worthy ancestors for the generations still to come.

There is a teaching in *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Ancestors, that has echoed through Jewish history for nearly two thousand years. "*Lo alecha ham'lachah ligmor; v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimena.*" "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." I've always loved that teaching because it refuses two temptations. The first is despair: "The problems are too big; there is nothing I can do." The second is complacency: "Someone else will take care of it."

Judaism rejects both. Instead, it says: Do your part, not all of it, just your part. And, no two people's contribution will look exactly alike. Some will be called to carry more, others less, but every contribution matters. Every act becomes part of something much larger than ourselves.

This congregation has existed for almost 170 years. And every generation faced moments when the future felt uncertain. There were years of war. Years of economic hardship – this sanctuary was completed in 1928 and then the stock market crashed and there wasn't enough money to keep it open. There were years of painful disagreement – who could forget the rabbi and synagogue president coming to a duel over which prayerbook to use. Years of remarkable growth. And for the past twenty-one years, Rabbi Cahana helped lead this congregation with wisdom and courage through moments of extraordinary change -- from expanding our community and strengthening our Jewish identity to guiding us through a global pandemic and the challenges facing Jewish life today. Every generation could have said, "Let's just get through this." Instead, they asked a different question. "What are we building for those who come after us?"

The sanctuary in which we sit tonight is an answer to that question. The Jewish music we sing. The Jewish preschool, The Jennie, that we built. The Jewish cemetery where we honor our dead. The scholarships. The endowments. The traditions. None of those happened accidentally. Someone imagined them. Someone sacrificed for them. Someone stayed late at meetings. Someone gave generously. Someone volunteered. Someone welcomed a new member. Someone comforted a mourner. Someone taught a child to chant Torah. Someone planted trees whose shade they knew they would never enjoy.

And because they did...we are here.

Now it is our turn. Because there has never been a moment in Jewish history when the future simply took care of itself. Every generation has had to decide. Will we merely inherit Judaism? Or will we help shape it?

In just a few moments, we will hear the sound of the shofar. It is the same sound our ancestors heard. The same sound that echoed through Moses' wilderness and that strengthened generations who built this congregation long before any of us arrived. The shofar has never promised certainty, it has only ever asked: Will you answer the call? Will you help build a Jewish future that is stronger, more joyful, more welcoming, and more courageous than the one you inherited? Will you plant trees whose shade you may never sit beneath? Will you join me?

Twenty-five years ago, none of us knew what the future would hold. Tonight, we still don't. But Judaism has never asked us to know the future. It has asked us to build it.

May those who gather in this sanctuary twenty-five years from now look back on our generation and say: They did not let fear write the story. They chose hope. They chose responsibility. They could not see the future but they loved it enough to build it anyway. And because they did...we are here.

L'shanah tovah