

## ROSH HASHANAH EVE 5777

Rabbi William M. Strongin

The sun sets upon the year five thousand seven hundred seventy-six and opens the way for 5777. Seven is a holy number for the People Israel, an auspicious number, in fact, for many peoples of the earth. For us, seven is the number of wholeness, completeness. The Hebrew root for this concept of wholeness is *shin, lamed, mem*, that is, the letters of the word *shalom*. When we say “*Shabbat Shalom*,” for instance, we mean more than “*Gut Shabbos*,” even more than the words “Sabbath Peace.” We mean that we wish a sense of wholeness to pervade the world and embrace us during the holy moments of the sabbath. A wholeness that foreshadows *Mashiachzeit*, that time of maturity and God’s sovereignty that we look for in the days to come.

That the year we are gathered here to greet contains three sevens, three being another holy number, such as the three angels who greeted Abraham during the heat of the day, or the three days that Jonah spent in the belly of the great fish, that the year is 5-7-7-7, should be a signal of a time of significant wholeness for us and for this world. God knows we need some wholeness, after this last year of fractured hopes, and plans gone awry, and global turmoil, and the rise of an environment in America where pettiness, nastiness and bullying is considered by so many to be plain truth.

But will we get a year of wholeness? It seems like the longest of long shots. We have waited so long, and it seems like *mashiachzeit*, the time of the messiah, is further away than ever. *Mashiachzeit* is a Yiddish term, made up, like many Yiddish terms, from both Hebrew and German roots. And so a Yiddish feeling-tone envelopes the word. If one asks about *mashiach* in Hebrew, one can quote words of the prophets. If one asks about *mashiach* in Yiddish, it’s like the little boy who asks his father for a pony and his father responds, “When the messiah comes.” I sure hope the three sevens of the new year is a Hebrew *gematria* and not a Yiddish one.

We begin a year that will see the last months of the administration of the country’s first African-American president, and the first months of an administration that we cannot reliably predict. Our congregation’s tax-exempt status demands by law that, when on the bima, I tread carefully along the shore of anything that smacks of a specific endorsement. So I must be careful to express my dismay that, in one eventuality, our new president may represent the lowest that our country has ever stooped in its on-going battle between the forces of moral championing and careless, bigoted smirking. I must be careful to express my most heart-felt prayer that we end up with a president whose goal is to help and not to hinder; to accept, and not to expel; to include, and not to build walls.

In only about one month we shall see what our future will be. If only the deep soul-searching that informs these Days of Awe one single month before that day of choosing were a tradition of not merely the five or six million Jews of this land, but of the hundreds of millions. If only the vast hordes of the blind would wake up from this collective nightmare and consider what it is they have been considering. If only 5777 were truly to be a year when peace finally comes to us. Then we would sit together within the sukkah of God’s embrace and sing:

“הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד!”

*How good and how pleasant it is when  
we all dwell together as brothers and sisters.*

What might happen? Would we, and not just we “America,” but we the world finally take a hand and end the horrors in Syria? On Kol Nidre eve I shall be speaking about the Syrian refugees

and about our own congregation's fight for them, but for tonight let me simply remind myself (and you as well) that the surest way to deal with the refugee problem would be to insure that there are no more Syrians seeking refuge in the first place, because their own country has become a home again.

What else might happen in a year of peace? Since we can be fairly sure that angels shall not descend from heaven with potions of tranquility, we shall have to create peace in the usual human-all-too-human way: with war. We must, as a global force, descend upon the so-called Islamic State terrorists and destroy them utterly. *Then* we can beat our swords into plowshares and stop studying war. If only when we are here again next year we can sing that song not merely as a yearning hope, but as an accomplished fact.

If only the next administration manages to do what others have tried to do, but have not been able to do: to truly beat the spears and the AK-47s and the machine pistols and the sniper rifles and the pipe bombs into pruning hooks. If only we could have even just a few sensible restrictions upon the absolute and unmitigated right of psychos and watch-list radicals to bear any and all arms. If only we could send our kids to school and not wonder which school will be on the news tonight. If only the gangs of Chicago were not better armed than the military of many nations!

If only we could stop speaking about climate change and actually do something. That something would have to be *huuuge*. A few solar panels here and there and cars with 10% better fuel mileage are not going to get us there. We no longer have to wait for the future to see the effects of climate change. Here they are! And we talk and talk, while we oil frack entire states into earthquake zones, and adjust to the new normal of an eleven month hurricane season. If only we would really take on this problem, maybe with a budget the size of the Pentagon's, beating swords into windmills and spears into tidal generators.

And I know full well that these dreams are not merely dependent upon the outcome of this election. Our current president has such dreams himself and all his efforts have not budged the country and its congress an inch. Powerful as our chief executive is, it is not a total power, and it will always be limited by other powers. We call this stalemate "constitutional checks and balances," and I truly do appreciate the magnificence of this arrangement. But it is not an arrangement without serious side-effects. And one of those is our tendency to hopelessly stand still when the world is crumbling around us.

Why are there not gigantic desalination plants up and down our coasts? The sea level is fast arising, why don't we drink the sea, and irrigate our farms with the sea? Think of all the water that would pour into Californian fields from its hundreds of miles of Pacific coast. We already have a significant start to this technology, due, in largest part, to Israel. Why is this not funded?

Why aren't the most toxic industries located on the moon, where there is no water or air to pollute, no life of any kind to endanger? Why are we still strip-mining mountains when there are entire asteroids orbiting out there made up of every mineral we could ever need, including the increasingly needed rare earths? What a joke: the rare earths are best found where they are not rare and not on earth! Why are we continually putting our heads where, to express it Biblically, the sun shineth not?

To my mind, the astonishment most of us feel when listening to the reasons of the many who support a certain choice for president is only the tip of the iceberg. (An iceberg, by the way, that

shrinks every year.) Even we who call ourselves more enlightened, liberal, socially awake still have our heads buried in the sand. Our existence here on this earth is in dire peril. Torah teaches us what happens to the society that will not face truth; the society that ignores its covenantal bond with God and God's earth. That society is swept away. It falls to (and I am essentially quoting Deuteronomy here) changing weather patterns that no longer sustain agriculture, diseases that are out of control, wild beasts, and brutal warriors out for our blood.

Now let me quote a little Ezekiel. Gog and Magog arise and gather for war. The last confrontation of that war will be called the battle of *הר מגידו*, Armageddon.

I am a liberal, modern, academically inclined, scientifically literate, progressive rabbi. I do not make fire-and-brimstone sermons. But I tell you that we are staring Armageddon in the face. And I am also telling you that I do not know how we are to avert disaster. But at the very least we need leaders who recognize our peril and do not seek to address it with platitudes, rhetoric and "trust me, I know what I'm doing." We need serious and intelligent and sensitive leadership. We especially need leadership that knows how to listen, because this will not be a job any one man or woman could do by virtue of their own abilities, it is going to take an enormous amount of cooperative effort to deal with all that we have to deal with.

Oy. So here we are on the eve of a new year and instead of speaking with joy, the rabbi is standing here and speaking of doom. But not just doom. Also hope. Our people specializes in hope. Even before the modern nation of Israel existed, our anthem was called "The Hope."

When everything is wonderful, who needs hope? It is when there are problems that we find the strength to accept the challenges they present through hope.

May God grant that 5777 really be a year when wholeness begins to take root on earth.