

Shanah Tovah.

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You stand on top of a hill and wave the cedar wood pole to and fro. Look across to the next hill. They see your pole and then you see another pole aflame, waving to and fro in the darkness. The baton is passed, the message conveyed. You pull the pole down, extinguish the flame. From the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem to Sartaba in the North of Israel and into Babylonia, see the whole Diaspora light up with a fiery path of torches.

This is the ancient choreography of marking *Rosh Hodesh*, the new moon, the beginning of a new month. Over two-thousand years ago, our ancestors signaled to diaspora communities that a new month was beginning for the Jewish people.

Is the true essence of Rosh Hashanah hearing the strains of *Avinu Malkeinu*? Perhaps it is the prayers that resonate, or maybe the prayers that irritate. Some say it wouldn't be Rosh Hashanah without apples and honey or the shofar or the long sermons.

But it really is all about the moon. Each month it waxes and wanes and then shrinks back into the darkness. Without the new moon, there would be no new month, and without the new month, no Rosh Hashanah.

Come with me back in time again-now into Rabban Gamliel's study. Thousands of years ago, there were diagrams of moon shapes on his wall. He showed them to ordinary people, and asked, "Did it look like this, or like that?" Why did he grill witnesses about the moon's shape?

Because the entire Jewish calendar hinged on their testimony. Discerning exactly when the new moon appeared and agreeing upon it, fixed our holidays and unified Jewish communities around the globe. Rabban Gamliel showed dogged determination in setting the calendar for future generations. Without our ancestors' pyrotechnics and Rabban Gamliel's grilling his witnesses, we might not have the systematic Jewish calendar that we have today and the unity we often take for granted.

Isn't it striking that our New Year is shrouded in such lunar darkness? It is only by Sukkot, that we see the light of the full moon. ויהי ערב ויהי בוקר—there was night and there was day, Genesis tells us. Creation begins with darkness. The prophet Isaiah tells us, “I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that I am Adonai, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name (Isaiah 45:3).

We explore this darkness today. We probe what it means to walk through the dark. Think of it as lunar spirituality, with the moon playing a central role. Half of the time, or half of the month, we are more or less, walking through the dark. And half of the time, we walk through the light. In her book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, Barbara Brown Taylor redeems the darkness that many of us fear and avoid. She helps us understand the treasures found in the spiritual or emotional darkness we pass through the darkness that some of us know all too well.

Yet we live in a society that focuses on what Taylor calls “full solar spirituality”. It's all about the sunny side of faith. It's about having God's light around the clock, to escape spiritual darkness. We look around; we think, “Everyone else seems to have this faith thing down. No one else is consumed by doubt. He seems happy; she seems to be connecting spiritually.” We often equate spirituality with happiness and fulfillment. And everyone else has it, except us. In light of the sunny expectations we have for spirituality, what do we do when it is spiritually dark? Who wouldn't want to avoid spiritual darkness?

Today I do not take on clinical depression or Job-like tragedy. I can't honestly say I have experienced either. Nor does my rabbinic training qualify me to be a psychological or psychiatric professional. But I do know spiritual darkness, both through my own experience and through being present for many walking through the dark. I have learned as others have, that darkness is as much inside me as outside me. Internal darkness can have a powerful grip.

Our ancestors knew the dark. Abraham, longing for Sarah to have a child, looks up at the stars in the dark sky, and is reminded of God's promise. Jacob's ladder is unfurled in the dark. Driven from his home in fear, he wrestles with an angel in the dark and becomes Israel. We, בני ישראל, are freed from Egypt in the dark. And Torah was given on Sinai in the unnatural dark. God doesn't spare Moses from the dark.

And many of you here today are in or have come through different kinds of darkness: the loss of a loved one or perhaps a creeping mid-life crisis; a nagging doubt about our careers, a deep questioning of our life purpose. It could be mourning the loss of a relationship or feeling distanced from someone we love. This is the kind of darkness that Taylor talks about, the kind of darkness described in the Psalms: “God made darkness His screen” (Psalms 18: 12). “Surely dark conceals me; night provides me with cover... “ (139:11).

As the psalms teach us, it’s not such a bad idea to learn to walk through the dark. It might seem crazy: why not turn on the light if we can? But sometimes, you can’t turn the light on. So the alternative, learning to walk in dark, helps us cope, grow as individuals and reconsider relationships. This is what awaits us, if we don’t turn away in fear. Taylor offers three suggestions to help:

1. **Give up running the show.** This is the message of *Unetaneh Tokef*, the centerpiece of our *Musaf* service today: we are not in charge. We don’t understand why things happen the way they do. So what’s the alternative to fighting the dark? Yield to it. Be in it. We don’t know what will happen in the future, but we have this moment in time. We can say thank you for this moment, even in the darkness.
2. **Allow ourselves to bump into things.** A traditional Scottish prayer goes: From things that go bump in the night, Good Lord, deliver us!

But Taylor says we should let ourselves bump into things in the dark. Think of it this way: as we walk in our homes at night, we ask, “Where’s the leg of that dresser again? Can I feel where I step on the bedroom floor? Maybe this time, I’ll only gently run into that cedar chest.”

In spiritual darkness, we bump up against ourselves. “There’s that stubborn streak again,” we say. “Darn, I stubbed my toe on that relationship again.” “Oy, really; didn’t I figure that out last year?”

In the dark, we bump into things, but we also grow and learn to trust. We use all of our senses, our imagination, our memory- to ponder, to problem solve, to prepare for new beginnings.

- 3. Slow down.** Darkness slows us down. Bumping into things slows us down. The bumps don't hurt as much; we have more time to think. When you are up in the middle of the night, you know that darkness can't be rushed. Don't exit the darkness so quickly: there's much to learn there.

Dark is neither a beginning nor an end. It's more like what author William Bridges calls a "neutral zone." In the neutral zone, you process what was, and yet are not quite ready to encounter what will be. It can be an uncomfortable place. Like we crave light, we crave moving out of the darkness on to new beginnings. We don't stay long enough in the neutral zone, to let it teach us.

The moon's waxing and waning is a truer mirror for our souls than the constant light of the sun. Can our relationship with God be different, if we trust this lunar rhythm; instead of longing for constant sunshine?

Of all the psalms that depict darkness, Psalm 23 is perhaps the most powerful. A part of our *Yizkor* service, we associate it with mourning. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me."

But where is the word, "darkness?" "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me."

As some of you know, "the valley of the shadow of death," is actually mistranslated from the Hebrew. It should read, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of deep darkness, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me."

Maybe Psalm 23 is not necessarily about death, but about spiritual darkness. The valley of deep darkness is created by hills or mountains on each side of us. Their shadow makes it even darker than if we were on totally flat land. Is there a way out of the valley of deep darkness?

Yes, because the darkness is not a permanent home. There is a way in and out of the valley. The darkness is something we move through to arrive to a new beginning. It is just that in the darkness, we don't always know what that new beginning will look like. But we do know many people

who have come through spiritual darkness to full and meaningful beginnings.

This line of the psalm ends with “For thou art with me.” We are not alone. This is the great truth about spiritual darkness, is that we are not alone. God is with us. And our community can be with us if we let them in.

We see this so clearly when synagogue and church attendance swells after a communal tragedy, God forbid, like 9/11; or after a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina. Faith communities know how to create a place of comfort, to gain solace with and from others; to walk together through spiritual darkness back to wholeness.

But Rosh Hashanah’s lunar spirituality urges us to become whole through our individual struggles too. We can experience our own spiritual darkness, yet not be alone. We can linger in that neutral zone, in the dark, in order to grow. This is the moon’s wisdom and a Rosh Hashanah gift to us.

We journey back in time again, to the top of the hill described in the Mishnah. Imagine holding a long pole of cedar wood with a bundle of flax tied to the top. You pull the bundle of flax down and light it on fire.

You stand on top of a hill and wave the cedar wood pole to and fro. Look across to the next hill—you see another pole aflame, waving to and fro in the darkness. They see you and light their pole. The baton is passed, the message conveyed. Take a look at the flame at the top. It shines in the dark sky. You pull the pole down, extinguish the flame.

You stand alone in the darkness, straining to see the sliver of the new moon. You gingerly make your way down the hill in the darkness. And for a change, you thank God for the dark. You released your fear, you are not alone. You will come through the darkness to a new beginning you never would have dreamed possible.

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