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Our tradition calls Yom Kippur *Yom Norah v'Ayom*, an awesome day, full of dread, because the imperatives of this most sacred of days are so daunting. This day uncovers the raw, unvarnished truth about the human condition: That although we want to be good people, try to be good people, and mostly are good people, we predictably and often, fail.

Yes there is radical evil out there. There are human monsters out there. We could certainly talk on this day devoted to human sin about the murderers and the ruthless dictators. We could talk about the so-called wizards of finance who threw so many lives in turmoil without much remorse. We could talk about the vapid and insincere politicians who clearly care only about amassing and maintaining their own power, no matter the consequences for the rest of us. Or the talking heads who incite hatred and fear.

But that would be a deflection away from the true urgency and responsibility of this day because Yom Kippur is not primarily about them. It's really about the rest of us. We who sometimes let loose our anger, penetrating and wounding those closest to us; who let our impulses get the best of us, who let our need for unhealthy and even dangerous gratification overwhelm our better judgment. People like us, who ignore or forget the resolutions we make. Who settle into a kind of inertia, habits that we know are wrong, that we know create distress for those we love, pain or distance between us, but we just never get around to changing.

And Yom Kippur comes each year to challenge us, to convince us that we are not ever just the victims of the circumstances in our lives. If, that is, we engage in the hard work of looking inward; if we are open to the accusations the prayer book will hurl at us tonight and throughout tomorrow, taking us on a journey into our darkest secrets. If we can summon the strength to honestly face our guilt and our grief at what we have lost or pushed away from us; if we can set aside our pride and dwell in some humility, and if we can summon the patience and the forgiveness and the gratitude those we love crave from us.

In other words, if we are being honest about who we are, and what we have done, then we will be able to transcend our pasts, our history, and begin anew.

That is this sacred day's hope. Yom Kippur is grounded in the human capacity for growth, and for forgiveness, a capacity that transcends all the daunting and even painful realities we face.

The Prophet Job in our Bible put it thus: *For a tree there is hope, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and that its tender shoots will not cease. Even though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the dust, Yet at the first whiff of water it may flourish again and put forth branches like a young plant.*

A tree cut down to its stump, Job teaches us, can regenerate its beauty, its strength and its soaring magnificence. It can be cut down and yet it isn't cut down. At the first whiff of water it can flourish again.

So too for us. Painful episodes, some of our own making and others we never deserved, cut us down. But we human beings are so constituted, that we have the capacity to rebuild our lives, to renew, to rise strong and tall and beautiful.

Rabbi and scholar of Jewish philosophy Michael Marmur, who was recently with us here at Temple Sinai, points out that the Hebrew word for hope is *tikvah*. Rabbi Marmur further notes that this word derives from the root *kav* which means "cord."

He cites Moses Haim Luzzatto, the 18th-century Italian Jewish mystic and poet, who likened hope to a cord capable of spanning to the upper reaches of heaven, indeed to God.

Rabbi Marmur teaches that *one can imagine hope as taking hold of the cord, be it ever so flimsy, and using it as a bridge to a future still unrealized. Hope is a thread, however elusive, that links us to a possible future. It demands that we take hold of it; otherwise, it is just a loose thread.*

In the thirteen years we have shared, I have seen so many of you grasp onto that thread, tentatively, sometimes ravaged by fear and pain and even shame, and yet from somewhere deep inside of you there was this impulse, this belief in yourselves and faith in the mystery of the Divine, that guided you toward healing and renewal.

The time a husband drew his wife close and told her with his words and his touch that he forgave her. Years earlier when he broke the glass beneath the chuppah they acknowledged that love like the glass could be fragile, that standing strong against unknown future storms would test and challenge them. But hope, and a determination not to lose what they had built, somehow prevailed.

And even when the ties that bound you together needed to be severed, I have seen you emerge from the chaos, from the hurt, and build a new life and even new love, stronger and more mature love, because now you knew what you could give, and what you deserved.

I have seen some make the most serious errors in judgment, sometimes causing terrible embarrassment, sometimes causing great pain and distance. And then, with hard work, in the face of defiance and rejection they rebuilt relationships, reputations and lives. Not by deflecting blame or by trying to pretend that the past never happened. But in the daunting work of owning their actions, of listening and hearing, of learning and changing, of demonstrating that they are worthy of love and trust again, even when hope seemed so elusive, so impossible.

And even in serious illness. I heard a woman interviewed on NPR recently. She said that she never liked the passages in the Bible that speak of God as a war maker. But when she got sick, that's the God she prayed to, a God who would go to war with her cancer. Hope for the return to health and strength, faith in the brilliance of modern medicine, in defeating disease and returning to living a full life.

And even when all seemed lost, so many of you have taught me that hope does have other textures, other high places: Like another good day, or a good morning. Like the time I witnessed an elderly beloved member of this congregation, on her deathbed, motion for her children to come close so she could tell them she loved them, that she was proud of them and that so long as they loved each other, they would be ok.

Each was a moment of enormous spiritual power. For how does one measure the tenacity and the forbearance to stare down all the reasons to give in, and grasp that thread of hope.

Yom Kippur teaches that hope is the universe's most dynamic force. If we take it seriously, Yom Kippur can embolden us, empower us so we can unburden ourselves from the sadness, from the claustrophobia, the sense that we are locked into spells of darkness and self pity and free our spirits to grasp that thread, to climb upward, in love and forgiveness, and build a new future.

Yom Kippur is supposed to hurt a little, to race the heart a little, because our wise sages understood that a humble, grateful, forgiving heart and a conscience alive with empathy, a spirit that can appreciate the blessings in our lives and draw strength from them are what make us human beings, are what make us at one with our Creator, because God created us with the capacity for hope.

Not the passive, naïve kind of hope that turns us into impotent, insignificant, powerless puppets to our fates, to the philosophy of “whatever will be will be...and there’s nothing I can do about it.” This day’s hope says that no matter the past, no matter the circumstances you face, you can create blessing, and meaning, and even joy.

Yom Kippur says that there is a difference between what you have done, and what has been done to you, and who you can become, and what you can embrace, and what you can give. All of us at different junctures in our lives have to face what has been cut off from us. And we can only replant, only rebuild, from the place of our losses.

And here is Yom Kippur’s promise: when we make the decision to grasp the thread of hope, making that determination to change, hope embraces us, and opportunities that we might not have known, strength, wisdom and love and companionship out there that we had been blind to because we were wrapped in our own darkness—they all suddenly array themselves before us. We couldn’t have imagined them. And now we know they are there. We know it. They are right there.

A final story. Wayne Dosick recalls a story about the world renowned violinist Yitzhak Perlman. Childhood polio left him only able to walk with crutches and braces. When Perlman plays a concert, the journey from the wings to the center of the stage is long and slow. Yet, when he plays, his talent transcends any thought of physical challenge.

One night he was scheduled to play a difficult and challenging violin concerto. In the middle of the performance one of the strings of his violin snapped with a rifle-like popping noise that filled the entire auditorium. The orchestra immediately stopped playing and the audience held its collective breath. The assumption was that he would have to put on his braces, pick up his crutches and leave the stage. Or that someone would have to come out with another string, or replace the violin. After a brief pause, Perlman set his violin under his chin and signaled the conductor to begin.

One person in the audience reported what happened: “I know it is impossible to play a violin concerto with only three strings. I know that and so do you, but that night Yitzhak Perlman refused to know it. And so he played. You could see him modulating, changing and recomposing in his head. At one point it sounded as if he were re-tuning the strings to get a new sound that had never been heard before. When he finished there was an awesome silence that filled the room. Then the people rose and cheered.

Perlman smiled, wiped his brow and raised the bow of his violin to quiet them. He spoke, not boastfully, but quietly in a pensive tone. "You know," he said, "sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.

That's the sacred power of Yom Kippur hope: no matter where we are in our lives, we can summon our strength, a healthy perspective and some courage, enabling beauty and an appreciation for what we have, and for love, and for who we can become. To paraphrase Job's beautiful words, the first whiffs of water that life may flourish again.