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*Our Rabbis (in the Talmud) taught: **When Adam (in the story of creation in the Torah) noticed that the days were getting shorter, he said: "Is the world becoming darker because of my sins? Will it soon return to chaos? And this is what God meant when God punished me with mortality?" Adam prayed and fasted for eight days.***

(BT, Avoda Zara, 8:a)

You all know the Biblical story: Adam and Eve had been expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit. They were all alone in the wilderness, fending for themselves in a cold and uncertain world, struggling to learn nature's ways and how to protect themselves from nature's cruelty.

With light you could see what was coming, you could farm and harvest; you could gather food and build shelter. With light, you could live. Darkness was to be feared. Darkness brought vulnerability and danger. And Adam noticed that, day after day, night came earlier and earlier. Each day ended sooner than the day before. Slowly, hour by hour, a day at a time all would lead inexorably toward endless darkness.

Of course, that's not how the story ends, as we all know. In fact, here is what the Talmud teaches next: *But as Adam observed the winter solstice and noted the days began to get increasingly longer, he said, 'This is the world's course', and Adam set forth to keep an eight days' festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals.* The world would not end, as Adam feared. Sunlight had returned, just after the darkest day.

This Talmudic teaching has particular resonance at the edge of this New Year, because so many among us have lived with the fear that darkness was closing in on them. As the economy collapsed, as Bernie Madoff's sins became apparent, suddenly the future was clouded in uncertainty. Some were suddenly unemployed; others lost almost everything. Can I still retire? Can my son go back to college? Can I keep my house? Can I find work? How will I get the medicine I need? These are among the many painful questions that plague so many among us.

Others, I imagine, continue to suffer their anxiety silently, too afraid of embarrassment or shame to come forward. They still dwell in darkness. Now multiply each example a thousand fold. Because these individual sagas of

sudden financial calamity dot the landscape of our own community, and well beyond.

Some have come to this realization for reasons far more agonizing than the devaluing of a portfolio. Many among us faced illnesses that brought their mortal fears, tossed into the complicated and confusing morass of hospitals and doctors and treatments. Some friends and neighbors have suffered immeasurable tragedies. Loved ones taken from them. Young ones ripped away.

What we crave is stability and predictability. We want to know that we can plan in a way that guarantees our future, or at least hedges our bets. We do whatever we can to avoid adversity or suffering. And we fiercely try to protect our children from them. And what we learned this past year is that you can plan, and you can save, and you do all the things you're supposed to do, and the darkness can still come.

Yet as the Talmud teaches, that is not the end of the story. And Adam's actions point to a way out of the darkness. Consider Adam's response to the shortening and lengthening of the days in winter and spring: He declared a festival for each season. Now, we can certainly understand offering gratitude when the light returned, when the days got longer, when Adam realized that he would survive. But why a festival for the season of darkness? Why would Adam declare a festival commemorating the fear, the panic, and the sense that there would be no redemption, as the nights grew increasingly longer?

And the answer is clear: Life brings its blessings and its challenges. That we know. And it's easy to acknowledge the good times, to draw lessons when life is easy. It's harder, much harder to explore what we can learn from the tough times. The Talmud teaches us that we can learn and grow from both. In declaring a festival for the darkness before the solstice, Adam wants us to know that we can grow from adversity, and emerge wiser, stronger than we think we are. And if we learn that the truest gifts transcend life's peaks and valleys----the gifts of companionship and love, of community, we will be able to create some of our own warmth and light, even when the sun disappears.

By the way, I learned this, from many of you. From those of you who suffered with cancer, or who watched someone you love battle illness, and then you became a tireless fundraiser and advocate for research funding and awareness. And more, I've seen you become the most authentic counselors and friends to others. Or the person who suffered major financial setbacks last year and came to me and said: "You know I've spent all my energy, for my whole adult life, almost singularly focused on making money. Only now, that I've lost so much of it, can I see how much living I've missed. Time with my kids; giving back to my community. Funny, how it takes a disaster to make you focus on what's really important."

When some of you heard that your neighbors had suffered catastrophic financial losses in this recession, and you learned that people with chronic illnesses were threatened with losing their insurance, with not getting their medication, when you learned that kids might have to leave therapy, you wrote checks and you enabled treatments to continue.

Our fears can paralyze us so that we retreat within ourselves, distancing ourselves from the people around us. Or we can know that we are not defined by our problems, by our weaknesses or our fears. That God created us with the courage to reach beyond ourselves. That it is in our expressions of concern, compassion and love that we find our truest sense of purpose. When we lean on each other, and when we lift up one another, together we can make our way out of the darkness

Temple Sinai is a large congregation. Over 3000 of us. And now, more than ever, we need each other. We need to know that we matter here, that we are loved here. And so today I want to mention a project to which we have committed here at your temple that will grant us a greater connection to community, belonging and purpose. Long Island CAN-- Long Island Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods Its work is based on the classic principles of community organizing, which teach that true change, in our own lives, in our families and in our communities, emerges out of the relationships we create with one another.

The Jewish Funds for Justice and the Union for Reform Judaism's Just Congregation's initiative have awarded Temple Sinai a grant to engage a rabbinical student who is specializing in community organizing to assist us with our efforts. Fifth year rabbinical student Neil Hirsch has joined us, adding his expertise and energy to this work. Our regional director of LI CAN is Beth Brockland, who also works closely with us.

There are two aspects to our work. The first is to become closer to one other right here, at Temple Sinai. We want to talk to you and learn from you. We want to know what your concerns are for your family? For the future of Long Island, and perhaps even beyond. What keeps you awake at night? And we want to know what brings you joy? What gifts you can share to help your neighbors and your community?

Under the leadership of Richard Laskey and Amy Mandell, we have brought together a large team of your fellow congregants, who want to engage in brief one-on-one conversations with you. We don't know what will emerge out of these conversations, and we have no agenda at all. We just want to get to know each other better. We want these conversations to create an even richer web of connection among the some 3000 of us here at Temple Sinai. We are calling this listening campaign *Hear our Voices: Shema Koleinu*, after the beautiful prayer that is a highlight of our holy day worship.

Obviously there is no obligation here, but if a member of our Long Island CAN team calls you to chat, we hope you will respond favorably. We need you; we need your voice and your help. We want you. And if you are willing to become part of our emerging leadership team, please direct your willingness to Richard and Amy by leaving a message for them here at Temple. If we know what brings on the darkness, maybe, together, we can create some sparks of daylight.

The second aspect of this work involves creating new and meaningful relationships among our new friends in our partner churches, mosques and temples across the Island, some 22 religious institutions of every religion, denomination, ethnicity and economic stratum that are affiliated with LI-CAN, building a powerful coalition in order to bring about positive change on issues that concern us all. To mobilize our collective caring and energy, to improve life for everyone here on Long Island.

This past spring, Long Island CAN achieved an important victory. One of our partner institutions is Saint Martha's Roman Catholic Church in Uniondale. St. Martha's has a youth program called U Strong For Change. Hundreds of wonderful, respectful, bright kids. It is led by a gifted young man named Alex Ticas, who grew up in Uniondale. Alex told us that the economy had threatened his teenagers. Summer was coming; school would be ending and these kids would have nothing but time on their hands. And without the prospect of employment for these kids, the local gangs, with their drugs and violence, will prove too enticing to the teenagers in Uniondale. So together, we began to lobby Nassau County to assist us in the creation of a summer jobs program for the kids in depressed neighborhoods throughout the county. And in May, at a press conference, Tom Suozzi announced just such a program that employed hundreds of kids, crediting Long Island CAN for making it happen. Many Temple Sinai members were proudly in attendance.

Richard Laskey was instrumental in this effort, and I'm sure I speak for him as well when I say that what motivated us was that we had gotten to know some of these kids. We heard their stories and became very impressed by them. We saw that they wanted to succeed in school, and in life, but that they had so many obstacles in their paths. And we wanted to help.

I remember, in one of my first meetings, the woman sitting next to me was an active member of the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury. She was born in Pakistan, and she had been an elementary school teacher in England before moving to the states, and she hoped to continue teaching here. So, she got the necessary credentials. Then, she searched the web and found a substitute position in a nearby school district and applied for it. She never heard back. She called and was told that she hadn't turned in all the necessary paperwork, which she had. Then she was told that she missed the deadline, which she hadn't. Finally, one of the administrative clerks let it slip: no one wanted a Muslim.

True human power rests not in my ability to control the markets, or prevent illness, or live a life devoid of pain or fear. That is impossible. Darkness and light are, as the Talmud's honesty teaches us, the world's course. True human power comes in the realization that even when darkness blankets our view, making unsure our steps forward, we gain strength and a sense of purpose, by joining with others to create our own light. Light we can use to see each other. In her eyes, to see your own reflection. To see your own love for your children, your parents. To take notice of him. And in his eyes, in his expressions of fear, of vulnerability, to see ourselves. To see that my destiny is tied to her family's safety and security and dignity.

And so on this sacred day, as we cross the threshold to a new year, let us pray: Eternal God of the Universe, God who is with us in all the seasons of our lives, grant us the wisdom to know that in times of light or darkness, it is in our connections to one another, in our expressions of kindness and of understanding toward one another, it is in the fight for justice and for compassion, that we know what it means to be truly alive, that we realize the fullest measure of our own humanity, created in Your image.

Amen.