

Rosh Hashana 5774, First Day "Facing the Future"

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George Brydges Rodney was a British naval officer. He is best known for his commands in the American War of Independence, particularly his victory over the French at the Battle of the Saintes in 1782. It is often claimed that Admiral Rodney was the commander to have pioneered the tactic of "breaking the line"

The use of Rodney as a first name originates with the admiral. It became a popular name for boys at the end of the eighteenth century -- think 'Rodney Dangerfield'. At least four serving warships of the British Royal Navy have been named HMS Rodney in his honor. Also there is a Rodney Bay named after him on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. There is an award winning rum named after him called (of course) 'Admiral Rodney Extra Old'.

A less-known fact about Admiral Rodney is that when he commissioned boats to be built for his use, he specifically requested the wood to be taken from a tree named Welsh Oak. Why Welsh Oak?

Welsh Oak was valuable to the good Admiral because it grows in difficult conditions, making the wood slower growing. When trees grow slow, the grain is more dense and therefore more resistant to cannonballs. That's an important fact to know if you're fighting someone shooting cannonballs in your direction.

When trees grow in difficult conditions -- wind, storms, rain, cold -- the wood grows more firmly and becomes stronger. And in the Torah, a tree symbolizes a person.

Deut. 20:19 Kee ha'adam aitz ha'sadeh -- A a person is like a tree of the field

Good timber doesn't grow with ease; the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees.

This past year many of us have dealt with some strong winds. Few years are completely good or bad. But it seems that entering this new year we're feeling a greater sense of vulnerability than in the past.

No doubt, most of us would enjoy a life free from lost keys, flat tires, clogged sinks. But it seems that's not the way Hashem arranged things this past year. And more significantly, we experienced lost jobs, damaged relationships, and illness. We feel vulnerable due to the financial climate in our community and country. Israel is more isolated. Who knows what's going to happen with the powder-keg in Syria? Peace seems so distant. And, then, there were the loss of loved ones.

Last year our shul community experienced many painful losses of the more serious nature. There was a point this summer where we were going from one funeral to another.

Yes – this year we do feel vulnerable. How do we grapple with the uncertainty?

Embedded within today, the Jewish New Year, is an approach to face life's challenges. And not simply survive them, but transcend them. Today is not only a day of judgment, but also a day celebrating the rebirth of the world. A day of hope and possibility that flows from embracing the creation of our destiny.

In the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, we can transform a life of fate into one of destiny.

A life of fate results from a belief that human beings are scripted and have no choice. In contrast, a life of destiny is the product of a belief that we are always in control of our thoughts. What we become will be determined by our attitudes, and how we transcend the challenges and grow from them.

Someone once said that a rabbi spends his time in two ways: 50 percent of it is trying to comfort the agitated, and the other 50 percent is trying to agitate the comfortable. For those of you who had a year of clear skies and smooth sailing, this talk isn't for you. I won't even try to agitate you. But for anyone who had tzuris this past year-- a clogged sink, or worse -- let me try to give you some comfort by sharing how we can face the future.

Facing the future takes courage. What kind of courage? Courage to act.

Ah, but you say, "Who me? Courage? I'm a bigger scaredy cat than the Cowardly Lion!" That's OK. Courage isn't the absence of fear; rather, it's the ability to take action in the face of fear.

The story was told of a man who was once having a terrible dream. A fire-breathing dragon was gaining on him. He could feel its hot breath on his neck. Terrified but exhausted, he couldn't run any more. Turning to face the dragon, he screamed, "What are you going to do with me?" The dragon said, "I don't know, buddy -- it's your dream!"

Challenges are what we make of them, aren't they?

I think it was said well by Mark Twain: Twain reminds us, "Courage is mastery of fear -- not absence of fear." It's OK to be afraid of what the future might bring.

Once the eminent philosopher John Dewey found his son in the bathroom. The floor was flooded and he was mopping furiously trying to contain the water and keep the damage to a minimum. The professor began thinking, trying to understand the deeper ramifications of the situation. After a few moments, the son said, "Father, this isn't the time to philosophize. It's time to mop!"

At times it's OK to analyze and philosophize -- as long as in the end, you take action.

- When Moshe faced a great challenge when the Jewish people sinned with the golden calf, he proclaimed, "*Mi l'Hashem alai*" "*Whoever is for G-d, follow me!*"
- When Bnai Yisrael were pinned against the Red Sea, Nachson stepped into the water, causing it to divide.
- When Yaakov (Jacob) faced the unenviable prospect of an encounter with his hostile brother Esav, he prayed, arranged bribes -- but first, prepared for war.

A few years ago there was a snowstorm that hit NYC, stalling many of the inbound trains. Passengers later told their painful experiences; sitting in cold, unmovable trains for 12 hours or more, toilets overflowing, and railroad employees ignoring passengers' questions. Most riders just accepted their plight as an inevitable consequence of using the train in a snowstorm.

There was one woman, though, who decided not to give up so easily. While the executives in her car sat around playing games without even bothering to find a solution to the problem, this woman took action. After persuading a railroad employee to open the door and let down the steps, she walked out into the snow (followed by the executives!) and found herself only a block from the subway station and a few minutes from work. She was the only person in the entire car who didn't accept defeat. The rest of the passengers might as well have been sheep going to the slaughter-house! Even if you're afraid -- take action, even if you're the first one to act.

At the end of *Parshas Vayelech*, (Deuteronomy 31:7), we read this past Shabbos:

"Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, **Chazak v'amatz -- Be strong and courageous** and do not be broken before them, for Hashem your G-d -- it is he who goes before you."

Let's face the uncertainties of the coming year with courage. It's OK to be afraid. Someone once said, "If you occasionally get down, don't despair. The sun has a sinking spell every night but it rises again the next morning." We're not going to allow ourselves to be broken. Whatever the situation, if at all possible, let's have the courage to act.

However at times, action doesn't seem prudent, or even possible. The future looks dark. What's done is done, and what's lost is lost. Barring open miracles that call for the reversal of the laws of nature, it seems completely unreasonable to think things will change, or get better. How do we then face the future?

I love the story of the high school football coach who was trying to motivate his players to hang in there during a difficult season. Halfway through the season he stood before his team and said:

Did Michael Jordan ever quit? The team responded, "No!"

The coach yelled, "What about the Wright Brothers? Did they ever give up?" "No", the team said loudly.

"Did Walter Payton ever quit?" Again the team yelled, "No!"

The the coach said, "Did Elmer McDonald ever quit?"

There was a long silence. Finally one player was brave enough to ask, 'Who's Elmer McDonald, Coach? We never heard of him.'

The coach snapped back, "Of course you never heard of him -- he quit!!"

When I played sports my coaches would always tell us: Quitters never win, and winners never quit. When I became older I found that there was a uniquely Jewish way of expressing a similar idea:

"Even if a sharp sword lies upon your neck, don't give up hope for mercy."

'Don't give up hope' is certainly a theme that we can connect to Rosh Hashana. It was Sarah (about whom we read today) who never gave up hope of having a child, even though she and Avraham were childless until the age of 90. We read in today's Haftorah of Chana's great faith, and how despite years of no children and taunts from her rival Penina, yet she also never gave up hope of having a child.

And if you think about it, throughout the Torah and throughout the ages it was the refusal to give up that sustained our ancestors, encouraged our parents, and has helped us weather the challenges of life. After all, what's the name of Israel's national anthem? 'HaTikva' -- 'the hope'. Hope based upon trust in G-d is part and parcel of who we are as Jews.

"Even if a sharp sword lies upon your neck, don't give up hope for mercy."

The ability to channel that hope comes from the courage to believe and have faith that in a world run by the Almighty, one on G-d's side is a majority. American author Rufus Jones, in his book "The Radiant Life", tells the story of a little boy playing on the deck of a ship in a mighty storm. The child was asked by a passenger if he wasn't afraid. "No, I'm not afraid. My father is the captain of the ship."

When things look bleak, it takes the courage of faith to say, "G-d has performed greater miracles than this."

When we're backed into a corner, it takes the courage of faith to say, "G-d didn't say no to my prayers. He just said, 'Not yet.'"

When we're battling sadness, loneliness, loss and the prospect of future hardship, it takes the courage of faith to say the words of King David, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I won't be afraid, because You are with me."

In *Europe in the Spring*, Clare Booth wrote, "There are no hopeless situations; there are only men who have grown hopeless about them." I won't be afraid and give up hope, because my Father is the captain of the ship.

And not only does courage help us to survive pain. But pain actually nourishes courage. Can you be brave if you've only had wonderful things happen to you?

Deaf, speechless and blind since early childhood, Helen Keller achieved greatness experienced by few without such handicaps. "The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were not limitations to overcome," said Helen Keller. "The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valleys to traverse."

In the beginning of my remarks this morning, I told you about Admiral Rodney. I told you why he preferred wood from the Welsh Oak, because it grows in hard conditions. Douglas Malloch was known as a "Lumberman's poet". Let me share with you some verses from his poem, "Good Timber".

Good Timber

The tree that never had to fight
For sun and sky and air and light,
But stood out in the open plain
And always got its share of rain,
Never became a forest king
But lived and died a scrubby thing.

Good timber does not grow with ease:
The stronger wind, the stronger trees;
The further sky, the greater length;
The more the storm, the more the strength.
By sun and cold, by rain and snow,
In trees and men good timbers grow.

The Midrash tells us that every blade of grass has an angel that whispers to it 'Grow, Grow'. There is also an angel that tells us every Rosh Hashanah, "Grow, Grow". Today, G-d is tapping us on our shoulders with this call.

This past year was a difficult one, and facing the future may seem daunting. But together, let's transform a life of fate into one of destiny. How? With courage.

The courage that, when faced with adversity, we are called upon to transform the feeling of helplessness and fear into action.

The courage that, when faced with overwhelming challenges, we find strength, through faith, to have hope. Hope from faith that even with a sharp sword on our neck, we don't give up hope for mercy. And hope from faith that as we walk through dark valleys, we know that our Father is captain of the ship.

And with courage to realize and accept that man is a tree; and that good timber does not grow with ease; the stronger the wind, the stronger the trees.

And with that courage, we'll be able to face the future of the coming year.