

Source of life, Creator, Sustainer, Support, Friend –

Eternal Teacher and Guide

It’s time for a New Year’s chat.

In this case, I’ll talk and I hope You’ll listen.

On this night, one of the holiest nights of the year, we begin our celebration of a new Jewish year, the Birthday of the World, and YOM HAZIKARON, the Day of Remembrance. We call on You to remember us as we also remember You.

Marking this day as the “Birthday of the World” is our poetic way of affirming life through the prayers we say together and in the thoughts that quietly reside in our hearts. We also have an opportunity to express a feeling of awe at the grandeur of creation in many ways, including when we hear about discoveries regarding the nature and origins of the universe. New photos of distant stars, planets and galaxies today are the modern counterpart to the work and legacy of astronomer Galileo Galilei, who demonstrated his new telescope 400 years ago last month. With his telescope, he began to catalog observations that shook the world. Galileo’s contemporaries considered his conclusions based on his exploration of the skies to be heresy and blasphemy, especially the notion that the earth is not the center of the universe. Galileo would, I am sure, take heart in the fact that we now embrace the contributions of science to what we know and the positive strides in knowledge that we, the human family, can take together. Scientific discoveries continue to offer a source of amazement at the complexity and beauty of creation.

Day to day, here at Temple Israel’s location in the woods, it is hard not to find inspiration in creation, whether from the robin’s nest that graced a spot just outside our building through the summer or from the doe and her offspring that often feast on the apples on the island opposite our entrance. Sometimes I wish

that those deer would just linger a moment longer when they see me, so that I could have a few more seconds to relish the wonder at how their needs and their lives intertwine with ours. Beyond the animals that are our neighbors, lightning displays, rainbows, the beauty of the trees, the peaceful falling snow – all of these are aspects of life and nature that surround this holy place.

Holiness in this space comes not only from these natural surroundings but also from those of us who join here in worship and community. It’s been a difficult year for some of us– economic challenges may have held us back from travel and prevented us from making cherished contributions of tzedakah or meeting all of our regular financial obligations. The ongoing debate on health care may affect us in a personal way, but even more urgent than those sometimes stormy discussions are the personal health issues that we try to address on a daily basis. As we face surgeries, cancer, unexpected injuries, the threat of the H1N1 pandemic, the regular flu, the effects of aging, and psychological concerns, we try to find the best treatment available to us, hoping that we can bring healing and renewal to our bodies and for our souls. We may tend to believe that we discover the sanctity of life primarily in our triumphs and at the times when we find physical and emotional well-being. Yet, there is holiness in our struggles and our defeats, in our times of sorrow and moments of despair. Those are the times when we really need a holy community – a KAHAL KADOSH – to see us through.

Through that KAHAL KADOSH and along with members of such a community, we turn to You, our Creator, for guidance and hope. We have learned from our own lives and the stories of others that there is much that we cannot control, which is why we need to be humble enough to reach out for help and strength. My rabbinic school classmate Rami Shapiro, in writing about the

12 steps to recovery of Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups from his own spiritual perspective, noted that one of our biggest problems as human beings is that we are under the illusion of being able to control life. He believes that a continuing assertion that we can be in total control is like an addiction. Rabbi Shapiro said that we should, in the spirit of the 12 steps, admit that we are powerless to totally control our lives, but to realize what we can do instead. We have the capacity, wisdom and ingenuity to navigate through the curves that life throws at us, to move slowly and deliberately over the bumps in the road.

As I waited for my own surgery this summer, the day began with the news of the death of Farah Fawcett, a celebrity who chose to share her struggle with cancer with the world through interviews and a video record of her time in treatment and her last days. It was gut-wrenching to watch, but her desire to let people know about the reality of her condition was a gift of truth and solidarity for patients, family members, caregivers and anyone who could relate to her medical challenges and her pain and be heartened by her appreciation for life. Farah Fawcett shared her story with dignity and she died with that same dignity that should have been one of the hallmarks of the summer of 2009.

After my surgery was over that day, and I was recovering at home in the afternoon, the news of Michael Jackson’s death flashed over the television screens and monopolized media coverage for days and weeks and, now, months. The story continues to unfold of a music star, the “king of pop,” who had wonderful and wise lyrics to share about how we can bring healing to the world, how we should see ourselves as part of the human family, and how our actions can make a difference. Michael Jackson participated in one of the greatest combined celebrity acts of TZEDAKAH through his work on the song “We are the world.” He had the message right for everyone else, and for all of humanity. Yet, we

know now that his own inner world was one of great sadness. Having his childhood all but taken away due to having a demanding father and due to his early status as a celebrity made it difficult for him to find happiness. As much as he tried to use his wealth and position to buy contentment and well-being, nothing seemed to help. Now we hear that he feared the man who was taking care of his business affairs in his last days, and that, tragically, he relied way too heavily on medication to give him the ability to calm himself enough to sleep through the night. Fans and colleagues around the world continue to honor Michael Jackson and his legacy, remembering the good that he did for those who found joy and meaning in his music. While his own words and thoughts didn't help him navigate life's challenges, they did offer guidance and hope to others who understood and took his message to heart.

We saw unfortunate examples of attempts at absolute control at work in recent elections in Iran and Afghanistan that elicited cries of “fraud” from many citizens who hoped that their votes would count equally to others. In Iran, especially, calls for challenging the speedily announced results became a movement, resulting in demonstrations that we have not seen in Iran since the 1979 revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power. While crackdowns by the government have given the appearance of “business as usual” for Mahmoud Ahmedinijad and the Ayatollah Khameini, these narrow-minded leaders have confirmed before their own people their desire for total control. They see their political power as the center of their world and the primary basis for their alliances with nations whose leaders have a similar approach to their people. It is only a matter of time before those who were demonstrating on the streets will demand a share of control and a more open society, one that values in its leaders humility and a true appreciation of freedom.

In the midst of the economic crisis in our country over the last year is the story of one man who thought he could control and manipulate people with no sense of compassion for the clients and investors he was serving. The center of his world was his plan, the newest Ponzi scheme, which created a web of fiction for those who believed in their good friend Bernie Madoff. Due to this one man’s selfishness, foundations and organizations that have made a positive impact around the world have disappeared or are struggling to sustain themselves. The total extent of the damage done by Madoff’s inconsideration and dishonesty will continue to be revealed to us. Control, for Madoff, was a goal and a necessity, but, in the end, an illusion and an affront to morality.

Eternal God, each us of us has the power to choose the center of our world. Will it be a desire for control over everyone and everything around us, to the point where people may resent our presence? Will our worries about money, health, success, and our own sense of self-worth become the center of our world to the exclusion of all other aspects of life? Or will our ability to adopt a hopeful perspective even when everything around us seems to be collapsing have a chance of being the central focus of our existence?

Source of Knowledge, justice, peace and truth, we pray on Rosh Hashanah that we be inscribed in the book of life, blessing and peace for a good New Year. We don’t seek to manipulate and dictate everything that will happen to us in the coming months, nor do we believe that every event in the book of our lives for 5770 will be determined during these High Holy Days. Unless we adopt the theology of Baruch Spinoza, Judaism doesn’t believe in predestination, that everything that happens to us is established by fate. We may, like Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, see invisible lines of connection between the various events of our lives that may indicate some sort of unfolding general plan or design, but

Kushner assures us that it is we who navigate through the passage of every year, with God “in the mix” as our silent but ever-present partner, hoping that we will make choices that will take us on the best path possible.

Finding that special path may be a matter of perspective. In his book, Fitting in is Overrated, Dr. Leonard Felder described the many ways in which people who feel like they don’t easily fit in to social groups or a community can constructively deal with situations that would normally cause them stress and disappointment. Felder noted that even when we feel that no one is listening to us, when we feel that reasonable ideas we suggest are being rejected simply because they constitute change, and when we have a sense of being pushed out of a circle of friends or community members, we can still maintain a feeling of self-worth. Based on a famous Jewish teaching about “two truths in our pockets,” these are the personal “pep talks” that Dr. Felder recommended that we recite to ourselves to sustain our confidence and strength as individuals who have something special to offer the world but who are, at the same time, part of a greater community. Felder suggested that, in our personal moments of uncertainty and doubt, we take a deep breath and say to ourselves: *You are a unique and amazing part of creation. You are an original. There is no other individual quite like you. You have nothing to apologize for. You have an amazing capacity for goodness, creativity, warmth, and wisdom. Don't forget who you are and don't stop looking for ways to express the positive gifts and insights you have been given.*

Felder encourages us also to admit that, even with all of our individual capacity for goodness, creativity and wisdom, we don’t have to feel that we are alone or that we have to act alone. He said that we should take another breath and declare: *You are like a grain of sand. You can stop trying to be perfect. There is no*

pressure on you right now to be more than who you are already. You are part of a huge, ever-changing creative process that includes millions of grains of sand, strong swirling winds, and refreshing waves from the ocean that sometimes wash over and connect the sand particles. You don't have to figure it all out. You are an essential part of this vast universe that has many other good and caring individuals. Your job is not to carry more of the load than is necessary. You simply need to stay humble and calm about the fact that you are one of many.

Staying calm and humble is one way to admit that we don't need to control the path of our lives but, instead, we need to have the vision that will take us in the right direction. So, Eternal God, we pray for that vision, that wisdom, that common sense that will enable us to navigate through the coming months. We don't need to manipulate others or make plays for power. We don't need to try to prove that we are better than anyone else. We merely need to see our own strengths with clarity, admit the areas where we need to improve with honesty, and recognize that being an essential part of this vast universe gives us the opportunity to forge partnerships, friendships and caring relationships that can help us face difficult days and provide us with companions with whom we can celebrate our times of joy and success. Help us, Source of all being, to turn our despair into positive determination and our contentment into appreciation for the gifts that are always before us. May our journey in the year to come see us inscribed for good life, for blessing, for joy and for peace. And let us say Amen.

P.S. Oh – one more thing – God – thanks for listening!