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**“Message In A Bottle”**

A very unusual discovery was made this year. It seems that in June of 1886, the crew of a German sailing ship, on a voyage through the Indian Ocean, placed a message into a bottle and threw it overboard. For years, that bottle was carried by the tides and currents of the ocean.

Fast forward to 2018, when a woman walking on a beach in Australia happened to notice that very same smoky colored gin bottle poking up through the sand. It is believed to be the oldest message in a bottle ever recovered – 132 years old, to be exact!

It turns out that this was one of literally thousands of bottles that were cast into the ocean by German ships from the 1860's through the 1930's. Each message was written out on the same standard form, on which the crew recorded the ship's name, the date, coordinates, and the route the ship was taking – with a request for the finder to return it to the nearest German Consulate so the Naval Observatory could study where the currents had carried it.

Interestingly, the last one of these bottles was recovered back in 1934, over 80 years ago, which makes it all the more amazing that this one was found so many years later. But, naval historians have just authenticated it, by matching up the captain's log of a ship called, the Paula, with details inscribed on the still legible form. And, if you're interested, you can now find it on display in the Maritime Museum in Western Australia.

Finding things that have been lost can sometimes be fascinating. Finding lost things can also be extremely powerful, as on this day of Rosh Hashanah / Yom Kippur.

Today, we open up the Book of Life, our message in a bottle so to speak, and we find inscribed on that scroll the old coordinates of where we have been, the route we were planning, and the hopes and aspirations that perhaps got lost along the way – the currents of time and daily life carrying them off to distant shores of disappointment or loss.

Rav Nachman of Bratzlav, one of our greatest Hassidic masters, related this notion of lost and found to the High Holidays. He taught his students that the literal meaning of Teshuvah is not atonement or repentance. Teshuvah should instead be understood as return – finding and returning that which has been lost.

He was very critical of the traditional image of a judgmental God sitting on a throne, with a flowing white beard and staff, decreeing the destiny of every human being. And he also disagreed that the main purpose of the Shofar is to call us to repentance.

He wrote:

Know there are angels and they are all holding shofars. And they are digging and searching for lost objects and constantly blowing their shofars. Each time they find a lost object, the shofar is sounded with great joy.

So, for Rav Nachman, the High Holidays are not solemn days to account for our sins, but days of great joy, because Jews, like the metaphoric angels above, are searching and digging and finding all the things they have lost.

So, in the spirit of finding our lost things, I have been giving serious thought to what we have lost in the past year, as individuals, as a society, as a country – specifically, what has been carried off with the rising tide of politics and social division and even moral decay – and how, possibly, we can go back and find it.

In a word, what I believe we have lost this past year is, our civility. We see evidence of it nearly every day – on Twitter, on Cable News, on Facebook, at rallies. We are pejorative, intolerant, crude, predatory, abusive and violent. Not only are we no longer a civil society, but we seem to have cast off even the veneer of civility.

Hillary Clinton placed many Republican voters in a “basket of deplorables.” Robert DiNiro began his speech at the Tony Awards with an X-rated tirade against the president of the United States. Samantha Bee unloaded on Ivanka Trump with expletives for posting an insensitive picture of herself holding her infant son during the heat of forced family separations. While President Trump has called his election opponent Crooked Hillary; the North Korean president, Little Rocket Man; and the 4<sup>th</sup> Estate of journalism, Fake News and the Enemy of the People.

It’s one thing to debate and disagree about issues; but it’s unacceptable, Jewishly and morally, to personally attack and demean our political rivals.

But, that’s not the full extent of it – nor the worst of it. This has been a year in which our civility has been lost on several fronts. This is also the year that sadly gave birth to the “#MeToo” movement. We are learning more and more about the abuse powerful men have inflicted on subordinate women. It is shameful and disgusting and far more pervasive than many of us here in this sanctuary may have realized. Not only have many of these men now lost their companies and their jobs as a result, but they have lost our respect, and we have lost a little more of our trust in humanity.

We have also lost more of our sense of personal safety and well-being in another year of horrendous mass shootings. 58 killed and hundreds wounded in Las Vegas, Nevada.

17 killed and 17 wounded at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Seeing school children marched off their campus with hands on their heads is becoming something we are actually used to seeing now.

The statistics are bad, and the future looks worse. David Brooks of the “Failing New York Times,” who also happens to be a self-declared centrist Republican, has written recently about his experience speaking at college campuses. Of our children he says, “this is a generation with diminished expectations.”

One Harvard student told him, “We’re the school shooting generation.” Another said: “The utopia of our parents is the dystopia of our age.” They have a loss of faith in the American ideal, and have trouble even naming institutions that work.

They feel increasingly alone and isolated – a feeling that is only exacerbated by social media, which makes them feel that their lives suck compared to their Facebook or Instagram friends, and then compounds their isolation by distracting them from spending more time with people.

New statistics from the Center for Disease Control now show that suicide in the United States is up 25% since 1999.

SOS, we are lost, adrift, off course, and by the time our message in a bottle is discovered, I hope it’s not too late!

Since this is my last High Holidays as your senior rabbi, I’m just going to lay it out there. I believe that many if not most of you feel the despair of our moment. Not just our kids, but I see first-hand how also our *parents* are using more drugs, alcohol, therapy, New Age remedies, and especially Social Media to escape, vent, medicate, seek healing.

Thinking back to where our journey began, to our more innocent childhoods, to communities in which we could leave our doors unlocked and kids could play alone outside, to a country whose presidents, whether JFK or Ronald Reagan, could inspire us to dream and be better citizens, we have to ask, what have we lost and how did we lose it?

The angels are searching and digging and waiting for our answer!

What has caused the isolation, polarization, and anger in our country? It is easy to blame it on politicians, as they are certainly on the front lines of this American syndrome. But, I think the real culprit is ... us, every one of us here in this sanctuary and in every home across America.

Our behavior and attitudes are clearly documented in studies and books. Robert Putnam pulled much of it together in his seminal book called, “Bowling Alone.” Here’s a

small taste of his findings. Over the last 25 years in America, there has been a 58% drop in attendance at club meetings, a 43% drop in family dinners, and a 35% drop in having friends over to our homes.

Ruth Whippman, an author and journalist who writes extensively on happiness in America, has noted this: nearly half of all meals eaten in this country are now eaten alone.

This is what researchers call, declining social capital, and the consequences of having less of it can be devastating. Scientific research now shows that a lack of social connection can actually cause premature death. As a health risk, it's as dangerous as smoking, and about twice as dangerous to our health as obesity. To put it in more positive terms, Putnam says that just joining and participating in one group cuts your odds of dying next year in half.

Meanwhile, how do we Americans fill the void? With our cellphones, computers, and social media. Jane Brody, a health writer, points out the obvious: "People rarely relate intimate tales of misery and isolation on Facebook. Rather, social media postings typically feature fun and friendship, and people who lack them are likely to feel left out and bereft."

I think you get my drift here. Americans are growing increasingly isolated from other people. We are retreating into our self-made bubbles and feedback loops. Whereas a generation ago, we all watched Walter Cronkite or Huntley-Brinkley, today our media consumption is curated by our individual tastes, which then get reinforced by the echo chamber of self-validation that we create. Taken to an extreme, it fuels our anger and resentment at the other, which causes us to lash out in Twitter rants, to taunt the other as an enemy against our self-validated claims of righteousness. Rallies and demonstrations are being fueled by toxins of hate that are recycled and intensified. In the extreme, this pathology leads to violence like we saw in Charlottesville, or even the mass shootings in Las Vegas and Parkland.

Our isolation bubbles are amplifying the sense of our own power and importance. Other people become objects for us to rail against or abuse. So, powerful men lose accountability, even to themselves, and sexually abuse women or young boys with a perverted self-justification.

But, the root of it all, the one thing that all of these behaviors have in common – from twitter rants to mass shootings to sexual abuse – is the echo chamber of self-centeredness and delusion that we create when we are disconnected from real people. Others become objects of our pathologies instead of real live human beings like ourselves. The less we interact, the more depressed and potentially hostile we actually become. Going back to David Brooks' meetings on college campuses, one student

summed up the extent to which we are lost when he asked: “How do you create relationship?”

It sounds pathetic, but this is really the fundamental question. How *do* we create relationship? For this is what we have lost in America and with it, I would argue, our civil society. We have lost the glue that has held societies together since time immemorial – social capital.

The angels are waiting, shofar in hand, they are searching and digging, hoping that we can recover what we have lost.

As the Book of our Days is open before us and we seek to answer that question, I’m reminded of what author Rebecca Solnit wrote: “The stories we tell about who we were and what we did, shape what we can and will do.”

As Jews, that is something we can definitely relate to, because in our most challenging times, our stories have always given us direction and hope. And one of the great interpreters of our story was the philosopher, Martin Buber. He was a contemporary and friend of Albert Einstein; he fled Germany in 1938 and joined the faculty of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His great contribution to Jewish philosophy was in helping us see the Bible through the lens of human relationships.

His most well-known book, which you may have heard of, is called, “I and Thou” – in which he describes the two basic kinds of relationships our biblical ancestors and we might have with other people. The most superficial and common is what he called, the I-It relationship – the kind we might have with the supermarket checker or the bank teller. In the I-It relationship, people are experienced in the transactional role they play for us.

I recently heard Rabbi Ed Feinstein illustrate this in a group of rabbis with his own personal story. He told us about how as a student he used to go to the same coffee shop on Van Nuys Boulevard several times a week to study. The same waitress would serve his coffee and pie, and they would always exchange pleasantries. One day, he happened to ask her how she was doing, and he could see tears begin to well up in her eyes. Immediately, an empathetic expression formed on his face, which gave her permission to pour out the serious troubles that were weighing on her. He told us that for two years, he had not known her story or anything about her – to him, she was an “It.” It was only at that moment that she become a “Thou” – not an objectified functionary, but a full human being standing before him.

I-Thou is aspirational and hard. To be present in every moment, to grant personhood, to listen, to respond with compassion, even in the most mundane settings, is challenging. But, to answer that sincere college student – this is how you create relationship and rebuild civility. And this is what we must do to save our country.

It starts with us, with one person and one relationship. We have to break down our pervasive I-It attitude toward the world that allows us to lash out in tweets and posts, and even abuse or physical violence toward the objectified other. We have to check ourselves and remember to dignify as a Thou those in front of us, or those on the distant end of our shared virtual space.

And every time we find the Thou in another person, let's imagine that the angels will sound the shofar, for we will have recovered one piece of our lost civility.

If we no longer want to be swept up by the currents of hostility, anger, abuse, and even murder that have come into full expression this year, it's time for every one of us to turn against the tide. When our children look at us, and ask, what coordinates did you plot, what message did you cast overboard for me to find, we have to ask ourselves whether we will be proud of how we acted in this turbulent time in American history.

Can we step out of curated bubbles, and dial down the volume of hate and division? Can we become our own moderators & censors on social media and insist that our public figures and leaders do the same? Can we treat every physical person we meet, or have power over, as a Thou, worthy of human dignity, regardless of his or her politics, status, gender, or age? Can we re-engage, join, actively participate, be part of community, return to backyard BBQ's with neighbors, rediscover the modern-day version of garden clubs and spend more time at our synagogues, churches, and soup kitchens? In short, can we rebuild social capital and live a life with people?

These are the existential questions that the angels are waiting for us to answer.

It is Rosh Hashana / Yom Kippur, and the Book of Life is open; the scroll has not yet been placed in the bottle – and we can still write our own message. It is a simple message that starts with one Thou – it starts with you, and it starts with me.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said:

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country.

When I found that I couldn't change the country, I began to focus on my town. But I couldn't change the town so, as an older man, I just tried to change my family.

Finally, now, as an old man, I realize that the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family.

Then my family and I could have made an impact on our town.

Their impact could have changed the country, and I could indeed have changed the world.

So, in my final Rosh Hashanah / Yom Kippur as your senior rabbi, I say to you this. Never forget, and never give up on the hope that, one person at a time, you can change the world for good.

For that is the message that has been cast into the flowing currents of Jewish history, for us and future generations to find. And each time that message is discovered anew and taken to heart, know that the angels above will have cause to sound the shofar and rejoice!