

Rabbi Benjamin David

HHD 2023

Here's how it goes. Can I tell you how it goes? Can I tell you? OK here's how it goes.

Summer comes and everyone leaves for camp. Lisa leaves for camp. Noa, Elijah and Sammy leave for camp. They all leave for camp. And suddenly I'm left...alone, like Jacob left alone in the night.

I'm pacing around my house. I'm coming into the synagogue. I'm sending off postcards to my kids.

My thoughts turn to the year that was. What a year it was! My first year at KI. Our first year together. It was a full year and such a fulfilling year and all of it against the backdrop of this convoluted world of ours.

All the joy, all the sadness, all the trying and trying again, all the living and the laughing and the languishing as our world urges us to give up already, just give in, throw our hands up once and for all, we're outmatched, overwhelmed, totally undone by all the war and the prejudice and the pain and the hate and the endless strife all about us and in comes Jewish tradition and reminds us that no, no, no that's not the Jewish way.

The Jewish way is one of persistence and faith and learning and listening and right action especially at a time like this, most especially right now.

I'm thinking about all of it. And I know you're thinking all of it. I was just thinking so much this summer. More than thinking, scrutinizing and wondering. How can you not these days? I was thinking while taking in Israel. While visiting Camp Harlam. While spending time with you. While staring at a computer screen that begged me to say something, something helpful, something hopeful as we start a new year, this new year, now, together.

As I'm doing all my thinking, I like to read a lot and watch movies. I'm trying all the time to absorb and challenge myself and give myself a chance to see our world in a new light, as you are, not the darkness of conflict and persecution and ignorance, but some other, new light. Our soul so needs that right now, something other than darkness and strife, some teaching, some light, some hope.

I watched this magnificent movie, called "Beautiful Boy," about a family that deals together with addiction. Nic is a teenager who struggles desperately with addiction and his parents struggle along with him. It is the most heart-wrenching movie. It grabs you and tears you to pieces as the family is torn to pieces by the grip that this illness has on poor Nic who relapses and relapses and relapses again and again and again. He steals and he lies and he hurts everyone around him and he hurts himself all in the name of the illness he carries, this vicious illness of addiction.

So many here have battled addiction or a loved one has and so you know all about it. You know it too well; it is an illness that can never fully go away but can only be managed and monitored. So many here have lived that life or are living that life. I pray that the coming year will be one of healing for you, one of recovery.

As we get to the end of the movie the sun begins to shine, even if only a bit. By the time we reach the closing credits we see that actually Nic has been clean for years now; he's going to have a second act, another chance. He's going to find a way to manage the illness and live, live fully, in spite of it all. He is going to endeavor to start anew. They all are. It is a movie ultimately about beginning anew.

This summer, amid all my thinking, I also watched a stunning series called "The Bear" about a family that owns a restaurant in Chicago. Maybe you watched it too. On Hulu. Who knew? They are the Berzzato family. The restaurant is floundering. The family fights relentlessly. There are dynamics on top of politics on top of grudges on top of, on top of, on top of. In other words, they're normal. They're us, the Berzzato's. The restaurant had been run by Mikey, who struggled with mental illness and more than that before taking his own life.

We learn all this right as the show opens. It's a whirlwind of emotion and stress and expectations.

We identify with Mikey as so many of us grapple with mental illness day after day and know what it's like to not feel ok. I pray that this holiday brings you some much needed solace and some help.

We identify too with Carmen, Mikey's little brother, who questions whether he has it in him to live up to his brother's name, or his cousin's boundless energy, or his sister's insightfulness.

Can Carmen finally make good on his promises? Can he rise to the occasion at last and step boldly into his new role? Can he lead the family in a new direction and bring the restaurant to a future that will be not only prosperous but fulfilling and healthy and loving? He is going to endeavor to start over. To begin anew.

I also read a good bit of Talmud this summer. I revisited the story of Rabbi Akiva, the sages' sage, the teacher's teacher and a mensch in every respect: humble, gracious, learned, giving. He becomes the preeminent rabbi of his time and an inspiration to our people throughout the centuries. But it wasn't always this way. Akiva's origins are profoundly unassuming. He grows up a shepherd, with nothing at all to his name except for some faith.

The Talmud notes that he slept on straw. We are told that he is illiterate well into adulthood and only begins his studies at the age of...40. After his first twelve years of learning he has accumulated 12,000 disciples. Twelve years after that he has 24,000 disciples. It's not a new life but it is a new chapter for him and he is living anew now and doing so with conviction and seriousness.

This is a sermon about writing a new chapter. It's a sermon about beginning again, no matter how old we are or who we are or where life has taken us, and in so doing resisting the urge to say 'my story is written. My story is finished. This is how it is and how it always must be.'

I believe that it's never too late to begin anew. I believe that. And I believe that's what this sacred season is all about.

Our tradition makes the case repeatedly: Noah and his family march onward after the devastation of the flood. Jacob awakes from his wrestling with an angel to begin life anew. Rachel breaks free of her father's abusive hand to start anew. As an adult Joseph rises above would-be resentment and anger to start afresh with his brothers. Ruth, after losing her husband, takes her mother-in-law by the hand and they endeavor to start over, together.

And, yes, Rabbi Akiva who awoke at 40 and set his life in a new direction.

But I believe in new beginnings for other reasons too, not the least of which are my grandparents, who came to this country with war-torn Europe just barely behind them and so many relatives gone; they arrived here with only scars and sincerity and began to make a new life for themselves, as survivors, picking up from the horrors of the Holocaust, learning a new language and ever-gradually assembling a new life for themselves in a new place: New York City.

They were the lucky ones that had the chance to start over at all; their lives foreshadow a verse Lin Manuel Miranda would write half a century later: In New York you can be a new man.

I also believe in new beginnings because I've had the great honor of working with our people for years now. I have watched parents rise up following untold tragedy. I have watched our fellow human beings stand once more after being lowered to the depths of pain and heartache. You've done it too. You've stood tall again when you thought you never would. You've moved forward even as the tears flowed like a river. After loss. After illness. After profound disappointment or frustration or shock.

We did it as a nation after 9.11. And we've done it certainly as Jewish community time and again.

We have within us – you and I – this profound muscle that compels us to get up once more even as life has brought us to the brink, cowering, lost and broken, battered and bruised.

So let this be my reminder to you on this day of new beginnings, at the beginning of the year, to have the courage to begin anew, that you need not wallow in the misery of current events, or say to yourself that your story is signed and sealed.

On this day all about the Book of Life here is my invitation to you to KEEP WRITING your Book of Life, keep writing your holy saga and write with all the vigor and curiosity and verve you have in you.

In case you need even more proof that new beginnings are possible, look no further than ... me. *Hineni*. Here I am. I'm also proof that you can start anew.

Fifteen months ago I didn't cross the Jordan as Abraham did, leading his people to a land of promise. No I crossed the Delaware to come to a different promised land, Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel of Elkins Park, PA. Have you heard of it? Who hasn't?

We packed up our belongings, said goodbye to our old life, our old house, our old neighbors. Lisa and I and our three amazing kids, we came here. We came to you.

We started over. We left a whole life behind us and we came here. Yes, we came with enthusiasm and a great sense of purpose, but it was still a leap of faith, as every new beginning must be. It was a new beginning and not just for me and my family, for all of us, for you and for me and this synagogue we love so much.

It's been a great beginning and I feel so blessed to be able to share this *bimah* with Cantor Levy and Hazzan Tillman and Andrew Senn and our choir and join with our leadership in steering KI ahead.

We could call these days new days for KI. Behind us lies a storied past: iconic rabbis, generations of meaning, layers upon layers of Jewish life, the legendary names, a presence here in the Philadelphia area as the years came and went, as the seasons changed and changed again; KI has been a constant, situated at the very bedrock of Reform Judaism itself, a place synonymous with social justice, with study and safe haven.

We are pulled here because of the KI story. That's why I'm here. Because of the KI story. That's why you're here too. I know that. It's a story that is equal parts inspiring and comforting. This place, this building, this community, this sanctuary is a part of us and, for many of us, has been so our entire lives.

The question now is the same question Carmen Berzzato had to answer; it's the same question Jacob had to answer as he rose up in the morning; it's the question we face as a congregation, as a community, as families, every one of us faces the question head-on at the start of a new year, a time that brims with possibility and promise: What chapter will we write next?

I will tell you that I am so excited for all that lies ahead as together we embrace what was and prepare for all to come.

Our theme for the year will be 'Make the Old New, and the New Sacred.' While we hold tight to the brave figures of the past who enabled our very being, those towering teachers who made KI with their wisdom and will, we come now to this new year and the future that awaits us with abounding optimism.

Why? Well for lots of reasons:

One of the shining, smiling reasons is our Cantor, who is celebrating twenty years here at KI this year. We are celebrating her, her music and all that she means to our community. Be a part of this year of engagement with her and with us. We hope you will.

I am hopeful because of our pre-school, brimming with 125 students. And a big seventh grade class with Bnei Mitzvah most weekends this year. A teen program that is alive and thriving; our Confirmation class this year is large and lively and absolutely life-affirming.

There are so many programs and events to list, which I won't do. This place is full of stuff meant to draw you in, bring you closer to your Judaism and Jewish life: Adult Ed, social justice, Israel, inclusion, C2C, music arts, choirs, HaMotzi, Sisterhood and on and on and on, all of it meant to open your eyes wider, warm your heart, help you to feel less alone in this frenzied world, more clear-eyed, more versed in the remarkable teachings of our people, showing our kids how to be an upstander at a time of too many bystanders, a world so wrought with ignorance and pain.

This isn't the KI of 1883 or 1923 or 1983, nor should it be. This is the KI of right now; that's what I signed up for.

You did too; it's the KI that needs to exist now, to help our young ones grow tall and strong even as cyberbullying and peer pressure and anxiety are at an all-time high, a new chapter at KI that needs to exist precisely now as antisemitism out there knows no bounds, as we look out at the relentless partisanship, the Xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, the racism, an epidemic of gun violence, a natural world on the verge, Israel at a crossroads, COVID still affecting our everyday lives, war in Ukraine, so many of us living with illness, so many of us hurting, and all of us confronting all the time the rather impossible realities that come with just merely existing right now.

These are what late September days look like in 2023. That's why we're here. That's why we're all here.

And so I come to this year not begrudgingly or nervously or reluctantly but ready. I am ready. The Cantor is ready. Are you ready Cantor? We are ready to begin anew with you.

A final word on new beginnings: The Talmud reminds us: '*Kol hatchalot kashot.*' All beginnings are difficult. Whether a new year or a new chapter, a new phase of life, sometimes even the prospect of another day can feel daunting. I know.

To be a part of this community, this people, this tradition is to be surrounded not only by love and by the beating hearts of those all around you, hearts that also carry hope and fear and angst and all of it. Let your heart be soothed by the presence of so many others, with you when you realize it and when you don't.

To be a part of this people is to also know in your heart that you have endured, that we have endured, that our people have endured, that your ancestors endured. They did. And that we are a people who rises up to face the dawn time and again, every time. That when the sun rises we rise up as well and journey on to the new day that awaits us.

L'Shanah Tovah friends.