

## Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779 Can You Feel a Brand New Day?: Profiles in Courage 2.0

Recently I have been in a kind of an organizing mode; I scanned and reorganized all my files – getting rid of all that paper; I’ve finally tackled the box of photographs – yes, I still have the ones from when you had to go to the store to get your film developed and then printed!; and I have a box of sheet music from God knows when. A lot of it is choral music from my high school choir days where I was the piano accompanist.

One the songs I found was from *The Wiz*, the 1978 movie adaptation of the 1974 Broadway musical of the same name which was of course, an adaptation of the *Wizard of Oz* – the 1939 movie starring Judy Garland, Ray Bolger, Jack Haley and Bert Lahr. The song I found is called *Everybody Rejoice*. Do you remember it?

Everybody look around  
'Cause there's a reason to rejoice you see  
Everybody come out  
And let's commence to singing joyfully  
Everybody look up  
And feel the hope that we've been waiting for  
Everybody's glad  
Because our silent fear and dread is gone  
Freedom, you see, has got our hearts singing so joyfully  
Just look about  
You owe it to yourself to check it out  
Can't you feel a brand new day?  
Can't you feel a brand new day?  
Can't you feel a brand new day?  
Can't you feel a brand new day?

I love that song...

If you remember the context in the movie, it is sung at the very end when Dorothy, played by Diana Ross, kills the Wicked Witch of the West, Evilene and sets free the workers, her friends and ultimately herself to get back home. It is a liberation song for sure, and one that reminds us of what can happen when we find one of the key elements needed in the movie by none other than the cowardly lion – and that key element is courage. By the way, name the actor who played the cowardly lion in *The Wiz*.... Ted Ross...

And what was the cowardly lion's name? His name was Fleetwood Coupe Deville!  
And for the grand prize, who played the Wiz? Richard Pryor!

The cowardly lion, the Wiz and Rosh Hashanah amazingly all converge, right now, on this brand-new day. I know for sure that L. Frank Baum, the writer of the original story of the Wizard of Oz was thinking of this verse from proverbs, when he wrote the story: "The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion."

As we began our holidays last night, I introduced to you the idea that this Rosh Hashanah provides us an opportunity to experience a brand-new day. As Rabbi Boxman taught yesterday, according to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah is not just the birth of another new year but is the original moment of the creation of the universe – THE moment the universe began. It is a moment that is forever infused with possibility and resilience; not just a moment to make resolutions, a moment, as our liturgy reflects, to renew our selves of the potential to which we were endowed by our creator. As a result, it is a moment for everyone to rejoice – as the song from The Wiz goes. If that's the case, as I believe it is, then the way we make that potential into reality is what we need to explore today and every day in this new year.

So what is courage, what does it look and where do we find it?

Courage is typically defined as mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. In Hebrew courage is translated as "Ometz Lev". Ometz means strength and lev means heart. Ometz lev – a strong heart is less about physical strength and more about having heart – the central character upon which everything else depends – our bodies, our minds and our spirits.

If you aren't already doing it, call up in your mind a person you think has courage or showed courage. What do they look like? What are they doing?

In many ways we have been acculturated to think of courage in terms of displays of power, might and bravery; military, police, firefighters and other first responders and for sure, they are powerful, strong, and brave and thank God they do what they do for us every single day! I am sure many of you are thinking of those people right now. I always admired those people. Maybe that's why I wanted to be in the Navy and became a police chaplain.

Perhaps some of you are thinking of the doctors and nurses and caregivers whose skill and daring are simply amazing. I have seen their work firsthand and it is courageous. When I thought of courage and the powerful and the brave, I realized that was reserved for a select few and I for sure wasn't among them. Although I come from a family of doctors, and there are quite a few more doctors than Generals, not everyone is a doctor, nurse or medical professional.

When I think of an image of courage, I think of the courage it takes to **stand up** every day and face the litany of issues that await us each morning. I think of the family dealing with a terminal illness and the struggle to make it through every day with a minimal amount of pain and tears and exhaustion. I think of the single parent, struggling to raise their family. I think of the person struggling with his self-image and sexuality, struggling with doubt and anger and confusion and feelings of self-worth. I think of the person wondering if they have enough money to get through the day, let alone the month. I think of the seemingly successful professional who has debilitating self-doubt. I think of those whose loneliness is crushing as they hunger for companionship and acceptance in a world that is more and more isolating. I think of those people who are scared and anxious about our world and the chaos and violence that sometimes erupts out of nowhere. All these people, waking up each day to face the day is an incredible act of courage. And these people aren't just nameless faceless anybody's...these people... they are me...and they are you. To wake up is an act of courage which is why when we wake up we say, "Modeh ani lifanecha..." thank you God, for giving me the strength to stand before you because I wasn't sure I was going to make it." For we make it through each day, not by sheer luck, but by God's grace. We make it through, because God is at our side, encouraging, strengthening, cajoling, nudging, pushing and guiding. The courage **to stand up** is a basic and powerful testimony to the enduring human spirit. When you think you have to be a superhero to have courage, think again. You don't have to be someone else...you have to be you and being you is being courageous. Thank God for that, every single day.

There is another kind of courage that this brand-new day inspires us to consider. It is the courage **to speak up**.

Of the many powerful moments in the Torah, the one that stands out to me as singularly important, especially for us today, is the opening line of Genesis: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. The heavens being unformed, and void and a darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." To me, three most important words in that sentence? And. God. Said. The creation of the world was brought about through words. Not through violence. Not through intimidation. Not through subjugation nor domination nor conquest. God's presence was made manifest in this new domain by speaking. Holiness was felt in this new world through speaking. Jews, believing in this ideal have become a people of words, ensconced in books to be sure, but the spoken word has always been primary. As a matter of fact, we love talking. It's a kind of Jewish vocation. We are sometimes loud, sometimes offensive, but always on. Except when we aren't. Like during silent prayer.

I remember vividly one of the first compliments I received as a rabbinical student of my service leading. One of my teachers came to my student pulpit to critique my work and said, "Wow. The silent prayer was great!" Not exactly the rousing endorsement I was hoping for. Rather than commenting on my brilliant d'var Torah, or my singing, it was the silence that got him. What was so special about it? That I allowed the silent prayer to go on for 2 minutes. Apparently, that's quite a feat. My bruised ego at the time didn't allow me to understand that human behavior being what it is, we actually can't stand silence for an extended period of time. If it's so hard for us not to talk, then why is it that we find it so difficult sometimes to muster the **courage to speak up**? This second type of courage eludes us so often at personal, familial, professional and societal levels.

Consider for a moment the difficulty we have in speaking up when we suspect something is not right at our work. While whistleblower laws exist to protect the person coming forward to share what they know, not too many people cherish that role. Or the tragic story of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity at Penn State, whose members forced one of their own to drink to excess, who then fell down a flight of stairs, and then subsequently succumbed to death as a result of his injuries – and no one spoke up in time. Or the number of people who daily experience harassment and discrimination or worse, and no one says anything. As the poet Clinton Smith once said, "The consequences of our silence is the residue of our fears" – fear of being disliked, fear of being targeted for violence or being ostracized, fear of being ridiculed or losing our jobs or our friends or our family relations. Fear of not wanting to get involved. The number of excuses are many. But as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

It is for sure an act of courage to speak up and to put ourselves out there as someone who believes in the power of words to bring a moment of God's Presence into our universe. It is for sure an act of courage to let someone know that with your words, you care about what is going on with them and their life. It is an act of courage to use our words to say things like, "No." "I'm sorry." "You are right and I am wrong." Or "I am right and you are wrong". God doesn't ask superheroes to do this, God asks average people like you and me. I am reminded of the prophet Amos who famously said, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of figs. But God took me from following the actions of everyone else and God said to me, "Speak to My people Israel"" If he could do it, so can we. We are called upon on this brand-new day to use our words to speak up and speak out and, in the words of Deuteronomy, "to not remain indifferent" in order that we create the kind of world we want and need.

As Elie Wiesel said, “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women or children are persecuted because of their age, race, religion, sexual orientation or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.” And we, at the center of that universe must speak out...loudly and clearly with the courage to be heard.

And finally, the last type of courage is the ***courage to step forward***. This is for sure, the most difficult, the most visible and therefore the most vulnerable thing we can do. For sure, not everyone has activated this type of courage. Stepping forward means you are identified. Stepping forward means you are all in. Stepping forward means you have, in some small, but meaningful way, altered the course of history. It was an act of courage to step forward and create a Temple on the corner of Hillcrest and Alpha – and thank God those courageous people did! It is an act of courage to donate blood and organs and bone marrow – and thank God people step forward and do. It is an act of courage to donate money to causes, to volunteer your time and effort – even 2 hours of your time. It is courageous to be an active and informed citizen and vote and help people to vote, to march and to rally and to vigil. Every one of those acts make a difference in the world – makes a difference in someone else’s life. Every one of those moments we step forward we ometz lev – we strengthen our hearts, the very center of our being and we strengthen our resolve to create a brand-new day for ourselves and our families, our neighbors and our communities.

One of my teachers always said, “You can pretend to care and too many people do. But you cannot pretend to show up.” When you show up, your courage says loudly and clearly, “I care about you and what is going on.” I care about this issue enough to be present. While we are not called upon to solve every problem, we are called upon to try. It doesn’t matter the issue. It doesn’t matter the cause. Your presence or worse, your absence will be noted. Step forward in some direction. When we show up, when we muster the courage to step forward, we make serious headway in solving the problems around us.

***Stand up. Speak out. Step Forward.*** In this past year I have seen so many examples of these acts of courage being played out here and all over the world. Incredibly brave students have stepped forward and demanded to be heard. Incredibly brave women have stepped forward to share their stories. Men have stepped forward to be allies and witnesses. People of all kinds of colors have stepped forward. Jews, Christians, Muslims have stepped forward. It has inspired me to try and be more courageous in more ways. I have written, I have preached, I have marched, and I have volunteered for those people and issues that strike at my heart as I know so many of you have as well.

I believe we are in a brand-new day; a brand new time where the joining of forces of people who are activating those wellsprings of courage really makes a difference in bringing Shalom to the world we so desperately need. If you are ready to deploy that courage inside of you, I look forward to joining with you. Be ready to make a difference. Be ready for a brand-new day. Can't you feel it? I hope you do this day and every day. Amen.