

Erev Rosh Hashanah
The Sun Does Shine
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In 1985, Anthony Ray Hinton was arrested and charged with two counts of capital murder in Alabama. Shocked and confused, twenty-nine year old Hinton knew that he was innocent and that it had to be a case of mistaken identity. Naively he believed that truth and proof, and a confirmed alibi, would set him free.

But with no money and a corrupted system of justice for black men in the South, Hinton was sentenced to death by electrocution. He spent his first three years on Death Row at Holman State Prison in complete silence. But as Hinton realized and accepted his fate, he resolved not only to survive, but find a way to live and grow on Death Row. For the next twenty-seven years he was a beam of light—transforming not only his own spirit, but those of his fellow prisoners, fifty-four of whom were executed mere feet from his cell. With the help of civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson, Hinton won his freedom in 2015.

On April 3, 2015, Hinton was released from the prison after the Jefferson County Circuit judge overturned his conviction and the state of Alabama dropped all charges against him.

When Hinton stepped outside as a free man for the first time in thirty years, he looked up at the sky, breathed a sigh of relief and uttered the words, “the sun does shine”.

A man who had been unjustly arrested and locked up on death row for thirty years somehow was able to find light and positivity in complete and utter darkness. He should be an inspiration to us all, a beacon of hope that we too can find light in our darkness.

On this Rosh Hashanah eve, 5779, I would like to explore areas of darkness in our lives: when we lose a loved one, when we battle illness, and when we feel the sting of a setback. And then I would like to explore how we accept our realities and begin the search for light again.

While I do not claim to know the reason we must go through dark moments, or why some people have more darkness in their lives than others, I do know that the choice of how to react is within our hands.

I invite you to join Rabbi Paley and I on this journey through the holidays as we explore our fears and roadblocks that keep us from feeling a brand new day. We pray that through reflection and introspection, we will be able to move forward and find our inner light.

I do not know a single person in this sanctuary tonight who has not lost a loved one and suffered the accompanying feelings of pain and sadness. Whether it was a parent, a grandparent, a spouse, a child, a sibling, or God forbid, a grandchild, loss of any life is tragic. While Judaism prescribes for us a path and guide for mourning, from shiva to shloshim to yartzeit, it is up to us to choose to enter the journey and find light again. We enter the darkness when our loved one dies but we find light again when we accept our reality and make the choice to go on living.

In 2011 Madonna Badger, a woman from Stamford, Connecticut suffered inexplicable loss when her entire family, three children and her parents were all killed in a tragic house fire. After everyone had gone to bed on Christmas Eve, Madonna was up late wrapping presents when she smelled smoke. She was able to escape from her window and climb up to third floor where her daughters were sleeping. However the fire was too strong and she could not enter the room to rescue them. In a matter of minutes her entire home was enveloped in raging flames and she lost everyone that mattered to her: her daughters Lily, Sarah and Grace and parents Lomer and Pauline. Following the fire Madonna entered into the depths of depression and eventually was hospitalized for suicidal thoughts, however, she quickly came to a realization. When in her darkest moments, when she yearned to feel the presence of her daughters and parents, she was blocked. However, when she stepped into the light, smiled, laughed and resumed living, she suddenly felt her daughters within her, sharing her happiness and giving her strength to go on living. She said, "My three children died that night, my parents also died, and I lived. I am still their mother, and I am still their daughter. I lost everything but I didn't lose my mind, no matter how many times I wished I had." Madonna eventually returned to work where she dedicates her time and energy to fighting for women's rights in honor of her three daughters. She lives because they cannot and she honors their memory every day when she betters the world for future generations of women.

Madonna Badger returned to the living to teach us an important lesson about grief. A lesson that life does not only go on, but that truly living life after the death of a loved one, can be meaningful and spiritually enriching. Professor Hancock of BYU wrote in an article about grief, "The trick is to follow the light we have. No matter how dark it is, retreating farther into the darkness makes little sense. Indeed, we need to seek the light wherever we can find it." While we sometimes fear moving on because it feels like a betrayal of our loved ones, if we think of it rather as honoring them, perhaps it is easier to do.

My dear friend Lauren Muscarella lost her mother while we were in college. After many difficult years, Lauren decided to honor her mother's memory by bringing light to other mourners. She wrote a book and started a foundation, both of which aim to bring healing and light into the lives of grievers. Lauren's foundation holds an annual event in which she asks people to write one thing they wish to accomplish during the year in honor of their lost loved one. In committing to living life, to going on a much anticipated vacation, to facing a fear, to volunteering time and energy, mourners slowly return to life and once again find light.

While all of this is easier said than done, let us draw comfort in knowing that light is possible. Light is there and it is reachable if we choose to engage it.

Another area of darkness in which we have all experienced whether on a small scale or large is physical illness. A diagnosis that is painful to hear, a long battle ahead, agonizing pain, stress and above all fear. Those who have beaten their illness and those who are currently in the trenches know that it is a dark place to be. While there are small slivers of light here and there, pain and fear darken even the happiest of moments. So how does one find light in the darkness? How do we keep going when fear and pain clouds our minds and bodies?

In Pirke Avot, the rabbis of old ask the following question. "Who is rich?" They answer saying, "those who rejoice in their own portion". But what does this have to do with illness? The rabbis teach us that in order to feel rich, healthy, and above all lucky, we must focus on what we have...not what we are lacking. Rather than focusing on the pain we are feeling and the fears we are currently experiencing, instead, let us focus on what we have. The friends and family surrounding us, the health of our minds, the healing hands of the doctors and nurses aiding us, the good days. While we must first accept the reality of our situation and mourn the loss of our health, when we are able to begin moving out of the darkness, gratitude just may be the way.

Sean Fogler, a 9/11 survivor and mental health advocate said: "Ultimately to be free I had to practice gratitude for the endless blessings that surrounded me, but that I rarely could see. I had to be patient, knowing that I control nothing in this world, and that things happen when and how they are supposed to. Most importantly I learned, the light that shines in the darkness lives in me, and I just needed to look within and listen."

In our Shabbat prayer book, Mishkan Tefila, we hear an echo of Sean Fogler's reflection. We read every week, "God of goodness, we give thanks, for the gift of life, wonder beyond words, for the awareness of soul, our light within, and so on...I never stopped to really think about it until now, but we always have light, even in the darkness because it dwells within us! Our soul is always intact, even when we are physically ill, and it is our soul, our sweet neshama, that we must tap into to find light in the midst of illness and pain.

In Japan, broken objects, like clay pots, are often repaired with gold. Rather than being discarded and forgotten, the cracks are filled with gold and made to look even more beautiful than before. The flaw is seen as a unique piece of the objects history, which adds to its beauty. This beautiful tradition works for us, humans as well. When we feel broken and physically flawed, let us fill our cracks with gold. Let us fill our souls with gratitude and let our light warm us from the inside out.

The final area of darkness I would like to explore this evening is probably the most common and recurring among all of us. It is the darkness we feel when things don't turn out how we expected them to. When we feel defeated, deflated and discouraged. It is the darkness that comes from divorce. From a miscarriage. From the loss of a job. From that dreaded rejection letter from college. From failed tests, failed relationships, and poor choices. It is the moment we feel like climbing into a cave and never coming out. We have all been here in one capacity or another and we know how crippling it can be. However, we also know that if we stay in that place for too long, we get stuck. So how do we find the strength to climb out and start anew? To move forward and find our light again?

There is a concept in Chassidic teachings known as "*yerida l'tzorech aliya*," "a descent for the purpose of an ascent." This means that in many cases, darkness exists in order to see the light. It is the contrast, the descent that gives the light meaning. For anyone who has ever gone on a wonderful vacation knows that the packing to come home is the worst part. However, without the sad reality that the vacation will end, we could not possibly appreciate it. We would take vacations for granted if they were never ending. So too, when God created the world.

Without the darkness, there would have been no need for light. Without evil temptation, no need for mitzvot.

So perhaps, instead of trying to erase the darkness and stuff it down, what if we used it to propel us even higher? What if we were able to derive meaning from the darkness, strength from the trial? What if we were able to believe that good will come?

Like with the death of a loved one and the battle with illness, first and foremost, we must accept our reality and grieve appropriately. However, afterwards, the focus must be on the future, on the strength and wisdom gained from the experience. While we cannot change the past or our physical situation, we can rise above it. Let us then, face the situation. Look it straight in the eyes and let it know that it can't defeat us. While our strength may have been tested through this ruthless, challenging experience, we are still alive. We survived the challenge and are here to tell about it.

A story is told about a combat pilot in Vietnam. The pilot was radioed to a secret mission which required him to fly in total darkness, totally by instruments. Hovering above a jungle under heavy cloud cover, the darkness was overwhelming. He radioed to his man on the ground and said "what can you give me?" The guy had not even a flashlight. The landing had to be so precise, in a small "postage" stamp in the middle of the jungle that an error of five feet could crash the chopper and kill them all. Finally the man on the ground said "I have a zippo!" The pilot said "Light it, and hold it up." So in the middle of the jungles of Southeast Asia, on a top secret warfare mission, a combat chopper pilot landed by the light of a zippo that pierced the darkness.

Even when we, like the pilot, only have the light of a zippo in a huge, dark, forest, let us remember that it is enough to light the way. Through acceptance, determination and perseverance we too can find our light again and stumble our way into a brand new day.

Shana Tova!