

Tomorrow Ain't as Bad as It Seems
Yizkor sermon – Yom Kippur 5777

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We have all longed for “the good old days” when life was supposedly easier, simpler and just better. As we return the Torah, we will again long for the good old days as we will sing Jeremiah’s words, “Return us to you G-d, so that we shall return, renew our days as of old.” In other words, we are asking G-d to bring back our “good old days.”

This longing for “the good old days” is nothing new. The *Midrash Echia Rabba* notes that already during the first temple period Isaiah was longing for “the good old days.” According to Isaiah “the good old days” were the days of Moses. But were they really “the good old days”? Let’s listen to what Moses has to say. “How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens and your quarrels?” The people are driving Moses crazy and at times even want to return to Egypt. The people had even begun to view the slavery of Egypt as “the good old days” after the passage of only a short period of time. But, clearly, those were not “the good old days.”

So when were “the good old days”? The Midrash makes another suggestion—that the days of King Solomon were “the good old days.” It seems to make sense. The first temple had just been built. A people who had been a nomadic people were now truly settled in their land. But the Book of Kings uses language to describe Solomon that is reminiscent of Pharaoh. Solomon is being portrayed as an Israelite Pharaoh! He enslaved the people and imposed draconian taxes on them, not only in order to build the temple but his palace as well. His harsh treatment of the people led to a division of the kingdom. Clearly, these were not “the good old days.”

The *Midrash* again attempts to locate “the good old days” and makes a third suggestion—that the days of Adam were “the good old days.” It cites the verse, “He drove out man and placed at the east the Cherubim to guard the path back to the Tree of Life.” There is a wordplay here. The word for “east” *Kedem* also means “old” as in “renew our days as of old.” The sun rises in the east; it is the first, or old, part of the day and represents “the good old days.” Though the Midrash is suggesting the Garden of Eden represents “the good old days,” we Jews have never tried to locate the Garden. Frankly, we don’t care where it was. Why? The message is that if you want to live in the past, you will inevitably be disappointed. You cannot return to the past.

Many of us have had the experience of returning to the street on which we grew up and, when we arrive, it is not as grandiose as we remember. We instinctively glorify the past. We romanticize the shtetl, but ask anyone who lived in the shtetl where they prefer to live, the shtetl or where they live now.

Yet, we should not dismiss the past. We renew days of old by taking the good of the past and infusing it into the present to build a better future. There is a wonderful case in point of this in the Book of Nehemiah. The Jews had just returned to Jerusalem from Babylon and rebuilt the temple. It appeared that the good old days had returned. Or had they? This time things would be different.

On the first day of the seventh month (Rosh Hashanah) Ezra gathered the people at the Water's Gate. Ezra blessed G-d and the people responded "Amen." Then Ezra with the help of the Levites read the Torah to the people from morning until noon and helped them to understand it. This should sound familiar. We have a leader praising G-d followed by the people's response of "Amen." The people are *davening* (praying). Then the Torah is read to the congregation. This is an early synagogue service developing right before our very eyes.

But evolution is not easy; it never is. This service did not take place at the temple as you would expect. Instead it took place at the Water's Gate. We do not know why for sure, but it is assumed that it did not take place at the Temple because the *Kohanim* (priests) who controlled the Temple wanted no part of the service: they found the idea of educating and empowering lay people threatening. This was an early version of the Protestant Awakening. Up to this point Jews primarily worshiped by bringing sacrifices. The sacrificial service took place at the Temple, which was under priestly control. Official worship up to that time had been controlled by the priestly enlists. But now a more direct form of worship was being developed. If you wanted to beseech G-d, all you had to do was take advantage of the evolving liturgy and pray. If you wanted to hear G-d's voice, all you had to do was study Torah. Not only did this allow lay people to worship in a more direct fashion, but it allowed Judaism to survive the destruction of the Second Temple. Though people could no longer bring sacrifices after the Temple's destruction, they were still able to communicate with G-d by praying. Now let me ask you this: would you prefer to still be bringing sacrifices or do you prefer to come to synagogue and pray? The destruction of our temples was tragic, but they also presented us with an opportunity to evolve for the better. The message is "the good old days" can also be found in the future. Let's take this message and apply it to us here at Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth.

We have had many "good old days." We have had a glorious 131-year history, but a glorious past does not ensure a glorious future. The Roman Empire had a glorious past but was not able to evolve and as a result disappeared. Yet, a small ragtag people that nobody thought would survive is still around; that is us, the Jewish people. The first time that Israel was mentioned outside of the *Torah* was in an obituary. The Pharaoh Merneptah had inscribed on a stele known as "Merneptah Stele" that he had destroyed Israel. Yet, despite Merneptah's boast, which took place shortly after the

Exodus, we have survived because of our ability to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances.

AKSE's ability to survive depends on our ability to evolve and adapt, because the demographic situation is such that we will not be able to rebuild our past. Demographics are like weather. You cannot control them; you can only prepare for them. In order to deal with this demographic reality, options such as selling the building and relocating to one of several proposed venues are being examined. I am not endorsing a particular option; they still need to be fleshed out. What I am asking is for each of you to keep an open mind.

I once heard Pat Reilly, one of the most successful NBA coaches, give a motivational talk. He used a phrase I will never forget. He explained that, "when change rears its beautiful head, see it as an opportunity." We are creatures of inertia; therefore, change makes us instinctively uneasy. Reilly suggested, rather than fearing change, see it as an opportunity to improve. Instead of holding on to a past that will never last, take control of the situation before it takes control of you. The Hebrew word for crisis is "*Mashber*," but it also means "birth pang" which reminds us that, though change can be difficult, if managed correctly it can become a transformative opportunity that can lead to improvement. We have all had the experience of being forced to deal with a crisis and make a change we did not want to make, but in retrospect came to realize that the crisis was a blessing in disguise, because it forced us to change for the better.

In fact, this is the message of Judaism. Our books are unfinished stories for a reason. The *Torah* ends before the Israelites even cross into Canaan. The *Tanach* (greater Jewish biblical canon) concludes with the exilic community of Babylon first being called upon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Our stories are unfinished because it is up to us, with the help of G-d, to write a happy ending. It is up to us to create our own "good old days." Our "good old days" are in the future.

Our synagogue's survival is dependent on our ability to evolve and create more "good old days" in our future. This is starkly demonstrated by Jewish history. The ten lost tribes of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) disappeared from history because, after being exiled, they were not able to evolve and find a way to make Judaism portable. On the other hand, the Southern Kingdom survived the exile and thrived because they were able to evolve and find ways to make Judaism portable.

Billy Joel hit the nail on the head when he sang, "the good ole days weren't always good, and tomorrow ain't as bad as it seems." But tomorrow will not be as bad as it seems if we are willing to embrace the challenges of the future. We can create new "good old days"; we only have to decide to do so.