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Darkness Before the Dawn

Circumstances had changed. They were in a new place, the two of them, having been plucked out of a world with a predictable and comfortable rhythm. One in which life was easy, at least in the way of navigating basic needs and everyday necessities. Life was easy in many ways. But the time had come to leave. No longer could they continue as things had been. So they left. You may be thinking that this sounds an awful lot like two rabbis you know, who had been well settled in a Southern town and who picked up their lives and moved to North North Davis (also known as Woodland) just this summer. It's true, it does sound like us, but the experience I am describing is that of Adam and Eve. A major difference, besides us not being the first humans ever created, was that their move was not their choice. You see, Adam and Eve, having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, could no longer be entrusted to spend their days in the Garden of Eden. God changed plans and now Adam and Eve were to start over. And so, they did.

Just adjacent to Eden, they chose a place to land, a place to make their home, not entirely sure of what that would mean. Having been absent at the beginning of creation and not familiar with the workings of the universe just yet, on their first night, as the sun was setting, the two of them were mesmerized by the parade of colors painted across the sky. They didn't even

have the words yet to describe each hue they witnessed. They literally had never seen something so beautiful. They welcomed the newness and delighted in it.

However, their awe and wonder quickly gave way to doubt and fear as the sun set completely and they were left, in total darkness, for the first time. Suddenly, this new newness, was unwelcome. Their thoughts began spiraling; their minds drowning in questions: Will we ever see light again? How will we survive without the light? What will become of us? And of course, the essential question at the root of it all: *why* is this happening?

At this moment when the sun fully set, for the first time, they existed, present at a moment of in between, or as our sages of the midrash referred to it, *bein hashmashot*, between the suns; a liminal space; described by Rabbi Jennifer Gubitz as “a time of transition when we are neither here nor there, no longer but not yet.”¹ It is a time of uncertainty, an unraveling of sorts, of fighting to stay present in the present, among the destabilizing force of not knowing what comes next.

So, what did Adam and Eve do? They began to weep. Overcome by anxiety, Adam spoke into the darkness: “Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder.”² The darkness felt all encompassing

¹ Gubitz, Rabbi Jennifer. “When We Can’t See the Future, Creating Light in the Darkness”. Earth Sciences 106: Earth Through Time. 18 September 2020, Temple Israel Boston, Riverway Project, Sermon.

² Avodah Zarah 8a

and as he wrestled with the question of why this was happening; he searched for answers and concluded that it was his own behavior that led him to this moment. He knew he should not have eaten the fruit from the tree, but Eve had already tasted it and she was still alive, so, he thought, it must not be true, what God had told him, one could eat the fruit and live. However, he now knew a different truth, that eating that fruit did cause a certain kind of death. It meant that life as he knew it was over. And yet, there still was life, just a different one.

Adam and Eve couldn't sleep, instead they held each other and wept and after many hours of fearing the worst, they saw something; a hint of light peeking above the horizon. They realized the darkness was not punishment after all. It was simply the natural way of things. Adam and Eve were so disoriented from experiencing something new that it had them looking to place blame, to find something to explain the change, when in reality, all it was, was different. The darkness was not a punishment for their behaviors; it was nature. As it turned out, change was the natural order of things. We relate, change still feels unsettling, even scary, to us, and yet, it is as old as time...literally.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the birthday of the world, which is to say, we celebrate the totality of creation. And it also marks our entrance into liminal time and space. At this exact moment, we, too, are in a liminal space, *bein hashmashot*, between the suns; the time between Rosh Hashanah and

Yom Kippur; between beginning a new year, when the gates of forgiveness open wide, giving us the chance to right our wrongs from the past year. But we know we have limited time because, according to tradition, those gates will close to us on Yom Kippur.

It can feel like we are immersed in complete darkness as if for the first time. We find ourselves, perhaps, if we're truly digging deep into ourselves and our actions, having similar thoughts to those that Adam and Eve had in the darkness: There is so much darkness, will I ever see the light again? How will I survive in this darkness? And, of course, why is this happening? Why am I here?

It is uncomfortable, distressing, to sit with these questions. Like Adam and Eve, we want answers. Like Adam and Eve, we seek comfort in knowing the cause that created the effect. And so, we engage in the work of Cheshbon HaNefesh, of taking an accounting of our souls. What were the consequences, positive, negative, or neutral, to each of our decisions, actions, and thoughts, this year? How did they impact our lives, our relationships, our city, country, or world? What repair is within our reach?

The High Holy Days demand we sit with these questions. Perhaps, like Adam and Eve, we'll achieve some clarity about something we could have done differently or better, even if our behavior wasn't actually at the root of pain or suffering in the world. The act of sitting with the questions of what we could do to build the world up instead of destroying what is left of it, helps us

grow. We are reminded that there are no “answers”, only attempts to close the gap between who we hope to be and who we were by analyzing our behaviors and recommitting ourselves to choose differently this year.

God made order out of chaos through the act of Creation, we too seek to make order out of chaos; to find meaning in chaos; to discover light in the darkness; the liminal space which leads to growth and light.

While I hope you consider all of this as you pursue the teshuva, the repentance, your soul needs to make with others and with yourself this year, I want to zoom us out, just a little, to apply this concept of *bein hashmashot*, liminal time and space, to us as a community. Because while it could be said every year, this year in particular, truly is a *bein hashmashot*, a year between the suns, for all of us at Congregation Beit Haverim. The sun has set on an incredible twenty-seven years of love, laughter, and light under the leadership of Rabbi Greg Wolfe. The end of that chapter holds both joy and loss; joy as we recall all of the moments of making meaning over the decades and we mourn for what was, including those years that weren't what we had hoped they would be because of the global pandemic.

And...the sun has yet to rise on what we, your new rabbis, will build with you, hopefully for decades to come. 5783 is a year of not yet knowing what will be. As a community we are “no longer (who we were) and not yet (who we will become)”. As uncomfortable as that may be for all of us, including for your rabbis, it's what we must do. We have no other choice. Just as there was no

way for Adam and Eve to fast-forward to a different reality, or to will the light to return faster, we can't either. The truth is...it just takes time. Uncomfortable, discombobulating, destabilizing, time. But like Adam and Eve, I hope we will hold each other through this time in between. And not just as we weep, but also as we laugh and celebrate, and learn and get curious. This is a year of Cheshbon Hanefesh, an accounting of our soul, not just as individuals, but as a community. Who are we? What are we building?

Rabbi Simons and I approach this liminal year as one of sacred observation. Our mission is to experience how things have been done here, so that we may honor what has been, and from there create our vision for the next chapter of CBH's rich and impactful history. We fully acknowledge that there will of course be many things that feel "new" just by virtue of our being the ones leading, but we view this task before us as a holy one as we accompany one another on this journey as a community.

This year will be hard, and it will also be good. Once the sun rose, Adam and Eve realized that the darkness they had experienced was simply part of life, light returned and they were able to dream again. From that moment on, their goal was never to return to Eden, to return to what they had known. It was to forge a path forward. Sitting in the discomfort, struggling to understand their new reality, led them to witness the light that was to come.

This is our year of *bein hashmashot*, our year between the suns. And I hope and pray that when we gather here in a year from now to welcome

5784, we'll be able to witness the light flooding in over the horizon. The dawn of a new day for CBH. And like Adam and Eve, we'll be able to express gratitude for not only the light, but even this time in between.

I want to end my remarks with something everyone has been waiting for...a grammar lesson. Every Rosh Hashanah we greet one another with the words "Shana Tova!" literally, A good year! However, the root of shin-nun-hey holds multiple meanings, each one illuminating and heightening its meaning. It shares the same root as the word, le-shanot, to change. And strangely, it also is the root of the word for repetition. In other words, a shanah tova, a good year, is a year of le-shanot, of change, of doing things differently and better. And it also denotes a year of repetition, or revisiting all the lessons found in our personal and communal histories. In this one word, Shana, we are reminded that every year offers the opportunity to change that which did not serve us and also to repeat that which did. We do this as individuals and as a community. And we are looking to you for help with both. Shana Tova, may this year be a good year, a year of change, and a year of honoring what has been and dreaming of what is to come.

Shana Tova