



Rosh Hashanah 5785 Drash, Rosh Hashanah day one – Oct. 3, 2024

By Steve Chatinover

לשנה טובה תכתיבו

MY NAME IS STEVEN CHATINOVER. IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, YOU HAVE TWO VERY IMPORTANT THINGS ON YOUR MIND - HIGH SCHOOL REUNIONS, AND REAR-VIEW MIRRORS. I CAN TELL BY YOUR REACTIONS THAT A BIT OF AN EXPLANATION MIGHT BE IN ORDER.

I GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL OVER 50 YEARS AGO; AND ALTHOUGH MY FOUR YEARS AT A SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE DOWN THE ROAD, IN WALTHAM, WERE EXTREMELY INFLUENTIAL IN DETERMINING THE ARC OF MY LIFE- IN PARTICULAR, WHO I AM AS A JEW- I FIND MYSELF AS OF LATE DRAWN BACK TO HIGH SCHOOL REUNIONS IN A WAY IN WHICH I COULD NOT HAVE ANTICIPATED EARLIER IN MY LIFE. IN EXPLORING WHY THIS IS SO, I HOPE TO BE ABLE TO SAY SOMETHING INTELLIGENT AND THOUGHTFUL ABOUT WHERE, I SUSPECT, MANY, IF NOT ALL, OF US ARE TODAY.

PERHAPS LIKE SOME, OR MANY OF YOU, MY HIGH SCHOOL YEARS WERE BOTH FORMATIVE, AND A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE. I HAVE MANY HAPPY MEMORIES ON WHICH TO FALL BACK, AND MANY PLEASANT SOCIAL INTERACTIONS TO FONDLY RECALL. PERHAPS UNLIKE MANY OF YOU, I ATTENDED A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL WHERE EASILY 65% OF MY CLASSMATES WERE JEWISH. AS SUCH, THERE WERE CERTAIN THINGS I JUST TOOK FOR GRANTED- SCHOOL WAS OFF FOR ראש השנה [Day 1, at least] AS WELL AS FOR יום הכיפורים. IF THERE WAS ANY ANTI-SEMITISM, IT WAS CLOSETED, AND, EVEN IF IT WAS THERE IN SOME SMALL WAY, I WAS INSULATED FROM, AND OBLIVIOUS TO IT. AND, YET, FOR ALL OF THESE POSITIVE ASPECTS, THERE HAVE BEEN VERY FEW HIGH SCHOOL CLASSMATES WITH WHOM I HAVE HAD ANY REAL CONTACT SINCE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION. HOWEVER, WHEN I ATTEND REUNIONS, I AM ELATED, AS SO MANY OF MY OTHER CLASSMATES SEEM TO BE, TO SEE AND INTERACT WITH PEOPLE I BARELY SPOKE TO, OR NEVER SPOKE TO IN HIGH SCHOOL, AS WELL AS TO TALK WITH THOSE WHO WERE AN INTEGRAL PART OF MY SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC CIRCLES. IN ALL CASES, THE CONVERSATION JUST SEEMS TO FLOW SO EASILY. AFTER ALL, WE'VE LIVED ADULT LIVES, AND DONE ADULT THINGS. AS I MENTIONED BEFORE, SINCE I HAVEN'T MAINTAINED CONTACTS I ONCE THOUGHT WERE SO VITAL, WHY, THEN, THIS DEVOTION TO ATTENDING A HIGH SCHOOL REUNION?

PERHAPS, IT IS BECAUSE I MIGHT BE THE ONLY PERSON IN MY CLASS WHO HAS TWO PARENTS STILL LIVING, AND WHO LIVE IN THE SAME HOUSE THEY DID WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL. ATTENDING MY HIGH SCHOOL REUNION REMINDS ME OF THAT FORTUNATE FACT, AS WELL AS REMINDING ME OF MY PARENTS' INFLUENCE ON MY LIFE. ATTENDING THE REUNION, THEREFORE, IS, IN MANY WAYS, 'GOING HOME'. BUT I SUSPECT THERE IS MORE. IN PREPARATION FOR OUR MOST RECENT REUNION, MY CLASSMATE, ONE OF THE TWO ORGANIZERS OF THE REUNION, ASKED US TO BE WILLING TO SHARE A MEANINGFUL MEMORY OF HIGH SCHOOL AT OUR MAIN GATHERING ON SATURDAY NIGHT OF REUNION WEEKEND. HAVING HAD SOME EXPERIENCE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING, I KNEW THAT I WOULD WANT TO SAY SOMETHING. WHEN THE MOMENT CAME, ONLY TWO OF US VOLUNTEERED TO SPEAK- MY FRIEND, WHO HAD MADE עלייה A FEW YEARS AGO [A RETIRED CANTOR] AND ME. AS I TOOK THE MICROPHONE, I RECALLED THAT ON OUR GRADUATION DAY- IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE GRADUATION CEREMONY; AS MY CLASSMATES WERE EMPTYING THEIR LOCKERS AND SAYING THEIR GOODBYES- I WAS STRUCK BY THE FEELING THAT I WOULD PROBABLY NEVER SEE MOST OF THESE PEOPLE EVER AGAIN IN MY LIFE. CONTINUING, I THEN SAID THAT I WAS FRIENDS WITH SOME OF YOU IN HIGH SCHOOL; FRIENDLY WITH SOME OF YOU; AND WITH SOME OF YOU, I PROBABLY DIDN'T EXCHANGE FIVE WORDS DURING HIGH SCHOOL.

AND, YET, ALL OF YOU WERE THERE AT A TIME THAT I WAS BEGINNING TO BECOME WHO I WOULD BECOME, AND FOR THAT, BEFORE TOO MUCH MORE TIME HAS PASSED, I WANTED TO SAY 'THANK YOU'.

SINCE I SPOKE THOSE WORDS AT MY 50TH HIGH SCHOOL REUNION A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO, I HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT MY HIGH SCHOOL REUNIONS ARE NOT MERELY AN EXERCISE IN NOSTALGIA. MY PAST GROUNDS ME. I HOPE THAT EACH OF YOU FEELS SIMILARLY. WHEN OUR PRESENT-DAY REALITY CAUSES US TO QUESTION THE BASIC GOODNESS AND FAIRNESS OF OUR WORLD, WHAT MIGHT THERE BE IN OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE PASTS, AND, CONSEQUENTLY, WHO WE ARE TODAY, WHICH HELPS US TO STAND UPRIGHT WHEN THE GROUND BENEATH OUR FEET FEELS LESS FIRM THAN IT DID A YEAR AGO?

AND SO, MY MIND THINKS OF REAR-VIEW MIRRORS. AS MY DRIVER ED TEACHER, MR. SADLO, TAUGHT US, YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO GLANCE BACK FREQUENTLY AT YOUR REAR-VIEW MIRROR IN ORDER TO KNOW WHAT'S BEHIND YOU. AS I THINK ABOUT HIS WORDS, I HAVE COME TO UNDERSTAND THAT HE WASN'T TEACHING US MERELY ABOUT DRIVING. LOOKING BACK TELLS US WHERE WE'VE BEEN. LOOKING BACK MIGHT TELL US WHAT DANGERS WE'VE AVOIDED, AND MIGHT YET HAVE TO AVOID. MAYBE WE'LL EVEN FEEL A BIT OF A LIFT BECAUSE, HEY, WE'VE MADE IT THIS FAR! THERE IS A COMFORT, ESPECIALLY AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, IN KNOWING THAT WE'VE MADE IT TO ANOTHER ראש השנה.

A REAR-VIEW MIRROR CAN TELL US WHERE WE'VE BEEN, BUT IT CAN'T TELL US WHAT LIES AHEAD.

THIS PAST YEAR HAS BEEN ONE WHICH HAS PROMPTED ME TO THINK OF THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR OF MY LIFE-AS-A-JEW-UNTIL- OCT.7th. BUT NOT ONLY THAT. IT HAS PROMPTED ME TO THINK OF THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR OF THE ISRAEL I GREW UP WITH, AND WHICH I HAVE EXPERIENCED THROUGHOUT MY ADULT LIFE. AND I ASK MYSELF THE DIFFICULT QUESTION- WHAT DOES THE ROAD AHEAD LOOK LIKE?

AND SO I STAND UP HERE, WITHOUT A CLEAR VISION OF THE FUTURE; OF WHAT LIES AHEAD- FOR US, FOR ISRAEL. WHAT IS IT THAT ALLOWS ME TO KEEP STANDING; THAT PREVENTS MY KNEES FROM BUCKLING; THAT ENCOURAGES ME NOT TO LOOK ONLY AT MY LIFE'S REAR-VIEW MIRROR? THE WORDS OF RAV AVI STRAUSBERG, A MEMBER OF THE FACULTY OF HADAR, TAUGHT ME A PERSPECTIVE, WHICH I HOPE MIGHT BE HELPFUL.

IN HER TEACHING CONCERNING תענית שבעה עשר בתמוז THE FAST OF THE 17th OF TAMMUZ, SHE OFFERED THE FOLLOWING INSIGHT:

IF WE HAVE GAINED ANYTHING FROM THESE PAST MONTHS, I HOPE THAT IT IS A DEEP SENSE OF KNOWING THAT THERE IS STRENGTH IN COMING TOGETHER- TO CRY, TO GRIEVE, TO RAGE, AND TO SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER

I THINK THAT I NOW UNDERSTAND ONE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION I POSED BEFORE- WHAT IS IT THAT OFFERS ME THE STRENGTH TO REMAIN STANDING AND WHICH STEELS MY RESOLVE? IT'S ALL OF YOU: THOSE I AM FRIENDS WITH; THOSE I AM FRIENDLY WITH; AND THOSE WHOM I DON'T YET KNOW AS WELL AS I MIGHT. WE WILL MAINTAIN OUR STRENGTH, OUR COURAGE, OUR RESOLVE ONLY BY STAYING CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER AND CARING FOR EACH OTHER, AS WELL COMING TOGETHER TO CRY, TO GRIEVE, TO RAGE- IN FINE, TO SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER.

AS I RE-READ THESE WORDS TWO WEEKS AGO, I FELT THAT I NEEDED TO PROVIDE MORE OF AN ANSWER. AS I READ THE HIGH HOLY DAY SUPPLEMENT FROM HADAR, RABBI SHAI HELD OFFERED A THOUGHT WHICH I THOUGHT MIGHT BE HELPFUL: *AND I QUOTE...*

IN A PROVOCATIVE IMAGE, THE TALMUDIC SAGE Rav ABBAHU IMAGINES THAT G CREATED AND DESTROYED MULTIPLE WORLDS BEFORE CREATING THE ONE WE NOW INHABIT (Breishit Rabbah 3:7). COMMENTING ON THIS מדרש, Rav JOSEPH SOLOVEITCHIK...OBSERVES THAT 'HERE WE HAVE G NOT ONLY CREATING,...BUT ALSO RE-CREATING, REBUILDING AFTER DESTRUCTIONS'. WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT? BECAUSE, Rav SOLOVEITCHIK SUGGESTS, THE WAY G IS PORTRAYED HERE IS MEANT TO TEACH US A PROFOUND ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL LESSON: 'AS G CREATES AND RECREATES...SO TOO, SHOULD [HUMAN BEINGS] BE READY TO REBUILD AND RECONSTRUCT, EVEN AS PREVIOUS STRUCTURES COLLAPSE'. THIS IS NOT

EASY, SOLOVEITCHIK ADMITS: 'TO BUILD INITIALLY IS DIFFICULT, BUT TO REBUILD IS EVEN MORE CHALLENGING'. FACED WITH DESTRUCTION AND DEVASTATION, WE ARE NEVERTHELESS 'BIDDEN TO START OVER AGAIN WITH FAITH AND RESOURCEFULNESS, AS G DID...THIS, THEN, IS WHAT THE TORAH REQUIRES OF [HUMAN BEINGS]: TO ACT, TO CREATE AND, WHEN NECESSARY, TO RECREATE, EVEN AS DID THE DIVINE CREATOR'. TO BE TASKED WITH BEING G's PARTNER, IN OTHER WORDS, IS NOT SIMPLY TO BE PRESENTED WITH RAW MATERIALS AND TOLD TO BUILD. IT IS, AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME, TO BE CONFRONTED BY HORRIBLE LOSS- BY CONFUSION ABOUT THE PAST AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE, BY THE TEMPTATION TO SUCCUMB TO DESPAIR AND FATIGUE- AND TO SOMEHOW MANAGE TO CHOOSE LIFE INSTEAD." [IN THE BOND OF LIFE/בצרוך החיים, p.8]

OUR COLLECTIVE REAR-VIEW MIRRORS, G-WILLING, WILL PROVIDE US WITH MEMORIES OF A FAIRER, KINDER, MORE INTELLECTUALLY-HONEST WORLD; OF AN ISRAEL THREATENED, BUT UNQUESTIONABLY TERRITORIAALLY SECURE. THE ROAD AHEAD- THE REBUILDING OF WHICH RAV SOLOVEITCHIK AND RABBI HELD SPOKE- WILL REQUIRE OF US AN EFFORT, A DILIGENCE, A COURAGE AND A RESOLVE WE MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT THAT WE WOULD NOT EVER REALLY NEED. AS FOR ME, I'M KEEPING MY EYE ON MY REAR-VIEW MIRROR, BUT IT WON'T DISTRACT ME FROM FINDING A WAY TO MOVE FORWARD ON THIS JOURNEY WITH ALL OF YOU EVEN IF THE PATH FORWARD IS NOT YET CLEAR. חזק חזק ונתחזק- AT THIS SEASON OF THE YEAR, AT THIS JUNCTURE OF HISTORY, MAY WE CONTINUE TO BE THERE FOR EACH OTHER, MAY WE CONTINUE TO WORK TO REBUILD TOGETHER, AND MAY WE ALWAYS BE EACH OTHER'S STRENGTH.

בן יהי רצון