

## **Remembering Forward:**

### **Sermon for Rosh Ha-Shanah Morning**

**Saturday, September 16, 2023 | 1 Elul 5784**

### **Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake, Westchester Reform Temple**

*Rosh Ha-Shanah* used to go by a different name. In Talmudic times, it was called *Yom Ha-Zikaron*<sup>1</sup>, “The Day of Remembering.”

Today I’m remembering Judy Weinberg, z”l, the last of WRT’s Founders, who died in July at the age of 97, marking the end of an era.<sup>2</sup>

So join me in a collective act of *Zikaron*, remembering back to our beginning:

With the Baby Boom booming, the story of WRT begins like that of countless other American synagogues in the post-War era: young couples moving to the suburbs, raising families, forming communities. News of an initial planning meeting convened by eight couples in April of 1953 spread quickly. By mid-summer, interest had grown to fifty families, spurred by a letter circulated by our Founders:

*“For some time,” it says, “the feeling has been expressed that it would be desirable to create a new Liberal Jewish Organization for our area in Westchester County. This movement will be a forward-looking, creative undertaking.”*

Within weeks, we had become a congregation. Volunteers rolled up their sleeves, pledged to attend Shabbat services at a rotating roster of nearby institutions, and built a little, handmade Ark, which lived in the Weinbergs' basement and was transported by station wagon each week to wherever services were held.

Our first first Rosh Ha-Shanah service took place on September 9th, 1953, at the Scarsdale Congregational Church, with Rabbi Eugene Lipman at the helm.

By October, membership stood at over 100 families. Dues were set at \$100.

In one of his first letters to the congregation, Rabbi Lipman wrote:

*“The essential virtue of Reform Judaism is our ability to grow and change as our living needs as Reform Jews grow and change.”<sup>3</sup>*

We are struck, hearing these voices from WRT past, by the clarity, positivity, and farsightedness of their message. All look to the future. All speak of growth and change, creativity and progress. Not one links the establishment of WRT to the survival of the Jewish people even though less than a decade had passed since the gas chambers and the crematoria. Not one mentions antisemitism, although in 1953 there were still neighborhoods in Scarsdale where it was an open secret that our people were not welcome.

We remember, on this *Yom Ha-Zikaron*, back to the days of our Founders. But when we listen to what they had to say about who we are, and how we got here, we hear an invitation to *remember forward*, the other kind of remembering.

**For the Jew, memory works both backward and forward.**

*Zikaron*, memory, comes from the Hebrew root *Zayin – Kaf – Resh*, or *Zecher* [ז.כ.ר], a verb that means both “to bore down,” like a drill, and “to point,” like an arrow.

Amazingly, this Jewish understanding of memory, memory that works both backward and forward, mirrors a scientific understanding of memory. Neurological imaging has established that the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory, is also active in dreams and imagination. What memory does is not so much preserve the past, word for word, image for image, but, rather, *link* the past, present, and future: a combination of remembering and imagining.<sup>4</sup>

Memory both *drills down*, through layers of history and experience, and *points forward*, to undiscovered vistas.

Without memory—where we’ve been, what we’ve discovered along the way—we cannot imagine where we’re going. Without memory, we cannot dream what we might become.

So join me now in another act of *Zikaron*, as we *remember forward*.

## **The year is 2053.**

I have just turned eighty, and I feel grateful to share these remarks, delivered on the occasion of WRT's 100th birthday:

*Shabbat Shalom.*

How honored we are to return to WRT for this auspicious occasion. These days it takes a lot to get Kelly and me on an ElectroJet, especially given the option to Zoom our holograms anywhere on the planet without spending \$6,000 on a so-called “economy” round-trip hypersonic ticket.

Still, for WRT's 100th, only in-person will do, and I feel especially grateful for all the kind people who have told me that I don't look a day over fifty.

Appearances notwithstanding, much has changed since I last spoke from this *bimah*. Long before WRT officially changed its name to *We Reform Together* in 2038, this community understood that in a global era, our vision and mission could not remain provincial. Judaism is not only that thing we do inside a sanctuary or around the dining room table; Judaism is a comprehensive approach to life. It invites us to apply its wisdom to an ever-changing world, inspiring us to meet the challenges of our time—every time—with courage, integrity, and dignity.

From the very first, Judaism emerged as a tradition rooted in creative responses to communal trauma:

Out of bondage in Egypt, we emerged as a **People of God**, who would never again serve a Pharaoh or any human master, but only God, the One Source of all.

Out of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, we emerged as a **People of Torah**, dedicated to reading together, learning together, praying together, united by the accumulated wisdom we call Torah.

And out of the smoldering embers of the Holocaust, we emerged reborn as the **People of Israel**, bound by our determination to revitalize our identity, our culture, and our faith, both within and beyond our ancestral homeland.

These identities intertwine, a threefold cord that will not break. Now, in the year 2053, we see how we have had to summon all three identities in confronting the great challenges of *our* time. As People of God, People of Torah, and People of Israel, we have had to marshal our People's collective spiritual, intellectual, and communal resources in order to meet the defining trials and tribulations of our era: the **ravages of climate change, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the global lurch toward authoritarianism.**

Each of these crises has forced us to lean into the transcendent values of God, Torah, and Israel which have always anchored how we, the Jewish People, creatively respond to a complex and challenging world.

Our desiccated and desecrated little planet now has few communities left unscathed by climate change. (I say this fully aware that some of you are watching this service on the

Immerso vision from your summer homes in Nova Scotia and Greenland.)

We do not use the word “Holocaust” lightly, reserving it for its proper historical definition as the systematic murder of millions at the hands of the Nazis. But when spelled with a lowercase “h,” *holocaust* means “to be entirely burned,” and it is no exaggeration to use this word to describe how we have exploited countless ecosystems, endangered and exterminated unprecedented numbers of species, and precipitated the displacement of close to a billion people, making the present-day global refugee crisis tenfold what it was in 2023.

Amid this grim backdrop we nevertheless applaud how WRT has consistently responded: from building the world’s largest environmentally conscious synagogue (2008), to inaugurating the first major synagogue effort to achieve Zero Waste (2013), to converting to renewable energy at the twilight of the fossil fuel age, to your present work, resettling climate migrants from drowned communities nearby as the Far Rockaways and far-flung as Sri Lanka.

In order to do all this, we’ve had to remember that we are a People of God, that takes as an article of faith our responsibility to safeguard God’s creation, to stand before the vast and mysterious Universe in humility, awe, and gratitude.

Technology advances. We become ever more powerful masters of the world. We can now manipulate genetics, regenerate tissues, organs and limbs, grow animal proteins in a lab, and, as announced just last week, terraform six square kilometers of

Martian soil into a working farm, with seeds from the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway.

But Judaism would remind us that the godlike ability to create and destroy worlds does not entitle us to use and abuse the world for industry, profit, and human benefit.

Said the psalmist: לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאָתָהּ תִּבְּל וַיֵּשְׁבֵי בָהּ:

*The Earth is God's and the fullness thereof, the world and its inhabitants.*<sup>5</sup>

We are but tenants here. We are not God; we are the *People of God*, tasked with caring for God's world.

Our Jewish values inform how we nurture the world around us, as well as the worlds within us: the realms of conscience and character that ennoble our humanity.

Could the Founding Families of WRT have envisioned how thoroughly Artificial Intelligence would change our lives, to the point that we now stand on the cusp of a new era in human civilization, one that will fundamentally redefine the nature of human consciousness?<sup>6</sup>

And yet, our Founders labored so that their *forward-looking, creative* undertaking would never shy away from applying the creative genius of the Jewish tradition to unprecedented challenges.

Reform Judaism honors tradition while embracing modernity. It proposes that no matter how much may change in our world, no matter how far we advance in intelligence or power, we must maintain our moral compass.

To this end, we appreciate that the technologies of our age have allowed us to live longer and healthier lives, to eradicate dreaded diseases, to lift millions from poverty, to explore new worlds. We enjoy an endless array of consumer goods, entertainment and diversions, comforts and conveniences, custom-tailored to our every preference. Piping hot synthetic Korean fried chicken from a vending machine? Sure. A 3-D-printed bespoke suit and one-of-a-kind Louboutins at the push of a button? We can do that. 1-hour drone delivery of a custom-built family hovercraft? Easy. A streaming holographic sitcom featuring simulated likenesses of all your best friends? Done.

At the same time, we have traded off privacy, choice, and autonomy. Imagine a time, not distant from now, when your thoughts can be uploaded to the cloud, stored, retrievable, transmissible. You'll never again forget an appointment, but every mistake you've ever made will be remembered, accessible to all of humanity in perpetuity.

Even with the democratization of information made possible by the internet, it should surprise no one that the information technologies of the 21st century have managed to turn our data into profit, allowing powerful interests to become ever more powerful.

And yet, we're here today for reasons whose value could never be reduced to data points. We're here to affirm a powerful idea: a



conversation encompassing millennia and a multitude of voices, all conveying how to live with purpose and creativity in a reeling world. We are the People of Torah. We affirm with our lives what Torah affirms with its words:

That life is a gift, not an entitlement.

That to harm or hurt or humiliate another person violates our dignity and dishonors the image of God in the human being.

That we are summoned to live beyond ourselves, in service of those who have less and who need more.

Torah principles transcend time and circumstance. They usually defy what's trendy, popular, or socially encouraged. They speak, as my friend and teacher Rabbi Larry Hoffman memorably put it, "in a register that does justice to the human condition." That is why they matter now more than ever.

At some point, everyone agrees (although no one agrees exactly when), artificial intelligence did become intelligent. Extremely intelligent. Writing prize-winning biographies / negotiating international treaties / re-conceptualizing particle physics-intelligent. Throughout human history, deeds both heroic and horrific have been carried out with advanced intelligence. But we are Jews, People of Torah, and we prize *wisdom* above intelligence. Our Founders would be proud that you have continued to embed Torah at the heart of everything WRT does.

In one further way you have kept the flame of our Founders' vision burning brightly, even in darkening shadows. The erosion

of democracy and the global lurch toward autocracy must continue to be forcefully resisted. Democracy is not a birthright; it is a struggle that must be won by every generation, in every election.

At the dawn of the new millennium, many optimistically hailed the 21st as the “century of democracy.” Authoritarian regimes like Malaysia, Myanmar, and Tunisia all became democracies. Across the globe, the future looked bright.

What we can say now, in hindsight, is simply this: we were wrong.

A vast array of contributing factors to democratic backsliding accumulated in rapid succession:

A rise in violent extremism following 9/11; the swift ascent and crushing fall of the Arab Spring; the social-media-fueled proliferation of conspiracies and lies; the growing disdain for international norms; the exploitation of xenophobia for political gain; the leverage wielded by anti-democratic regimes like Russia, China, and Iran to erode Western confidence in democracy; the silencing of dissent; the banning of books; the empowering of autocrats and their sympathizers. Meanwhile, with every passing year, checks on abuse of power have deteriorated and “democracy’s opponents have labored persistently to dismantle... [the post-World War II] international order and the restraints it imposed on their ambitions.”<sup>7</sup>

Many of us, watching this disaster unfold in slow motion over the first twenty-five years of the new century, crossed our fingers and

held our breath, hoping it would just be a phase. From the view today in 2053, when more than half of the world's ten billion people live under authoritarian rule, we know better.

Still, this wouldn't be a Jewish message if I said, "all hope is lost." For we are the People of Israel, and we were born to resist tyranny. From antiquity, Judaism has warned against rulers who arrogate authority unto themselves. Moses feared that a king would hoard treasure and accumulate stables and harems; that a king would inevitably "bring the people back to Egypt," which may or may not have been a metaphor. So Moses demanded that the king must keep a scroll of the Law by the throne at all times. No person, not even the king—*especially not the king*—is above the Law.<sup>8</sup>

So you should take pride that, shortly after our rededication as *We Reform Together*, WRT also became a chartering member of the Alliance for Human Advancement ("AHA"): a collective of spiritual communities and civic institutions all dedicated to the advancement of human freedom, to open spiritual expression, to the promotion of democratic principles. Since its founding in 2043, AHA has grown from 100 member institutions to over 25,000, operating chapters on every continent, in over 170 countries, and in all 52 United States.

You have come to realize the great good we can accomplish together as a congregation; but what we can accomplish together as a global community is orders of magnitude greater.

Throughout my rabbinate, I've heard innumerable objections to "organized religion," a common trope among those who extrapolate a damning appraisal from the (admittedly too many)

examples of willfully ignorant fundamentalism and violent extremism. Such critics, though well-intentioned, paint with too broad a brush, neglecting the unsung heroism of spiritual communities like ours, that do God's work here on earth, day in and day out, that magnify and multiply the good that any one person could do, acting alone.

We desperately *need* our congregations, our spiritual collectives. As the 21st century dawned we entered a period of hyper-individualism. Families, social clubs, bowling leagues, and especially congregations, began to disintegrate, their prominence in American life fading with each passing year.

By 2023 the great “dechurching” of Americans had reduced congregational affiliation by at least 15%, with no end in sight.<sup>9</sup> We began to spend more time with our cell phones than with other people, taking in only those curated sound-bites that would corroborate our already-held views, increasing our isolation even as we boasted of how “connected” our tools had allowed us to become. We endured not only pandemics of pathogens but pandemics of loneliness, aimlessness, loss of purpose. Many of us lost our way.

Many forgot that, above all else, our Founders cherished *community* and understood that Judaism cannot thrive without a People to live it and love it. We, the Jewish People, have to shoulder the responsibility to keep our sacred enterprise vital.

But you, who have carried this torch of commitment to WRT for a century, understand that congregations must aspire to so much more than providing life-cycle rituals and High Holiday services in exchange for something called “dues.”

Congregations are a force-multiplier for good. Congregations are where we, the People of God, Torah and Israel, come together to speak in a register that does justice to the human condition. Congregations are where we *remember*: who we are, what matters, what we will accomplish together.

**Every time you renew your membership at WRT, you *re-member*.**

And what you have remembered along the way marks the fulfillment of our Founders' vision: that we are not an island, but part of an *ecosystem*, one in which we all take turns giving and receiving, needing and being needed, and where our actions make a difference that we may not perceive here and now, but which will bless the generations after us.

This ecosystem needs to be nourished and nurtured, day by day and year by year: not just by your clergy and professional staff, but by *you*—the congregation. For all our advancements, when it comes to building a flourishing congregation, there is no substitute for rolling up your sleeves, showing up, and doing the work.

And that, my friends, is what I hope we will remember—backwards and forwards—on this first day of the next one hundred years of our journey.

But, oh: The flasher on the ChronoSync is telling me to wrap this up, and I hear that Jack from Standing Room has prepared a lovely *Oneg* for us (some things never change), so Kelly and I will

look forward to greeting you on the rooftop Holodeck<sup>10</sup> after services.

*Chazak ve'ematz*: be strong and of good courage, WRT, and may God bless our work, our community, our People, the human family, and this little home we call the world.

1. This is the term favored by the *machzor*, the High Holiday prayer book; see, for example, the language of the Yom Tov *Kiddush* and the blessings after the readings of *Haftarah*. ↩
2. Judy z"l and her late husband Charles Weinberg z"l (1920 – 2015) were the last of the original eight founding couples to remain affiliated with WRT until the end of their lives. Their support for WRT remained steadfast throughout our seven decades of growth and evolution, and their descendants continue to remain connected to our congregation. ↩
3. Gratitude to WRT congregant, author Barbara Josselson, whose essay chronicling WRT, 1953-2018, "Generation to Generation," presents this background. ↩
4. See this article and its bibliography for more. ↩
5. Psalms 24:1. ↩
6. I would encourage you to read Danny Schiff, *Judaism in a Digital Age: An Ancient Tradition Confronts a Transformative Era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Schiff's book deeply influenced the direction of this sermon, and my thinking about the future of Judaism. ↩
7. Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, "[The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule](#)," as reported on FreedomHouse.org, 2022. ↩
8. See Deuteronomy 17:14-20. ↩
9. See Jessica Grose, "[The Largest and Fastest Religious Shift in America is Well Underway](#)," *New York Times* (Online Edition), June 21, 2023 ↩
10. As popularized by the TV franchise *Star Trek*. ↩