Presidents' Address - Kol Nidre 2021

Good Evening. My name is Gordon Bennett and …. And, I'm still standing … as president of Congregation Kehillath Israel.

On behalf of the entire staff, Rabbis, and lay-leadership, I'd like to welcome you. We know you had a choice of synagogues to pray in this evening and we're honored you choose to worship with us.

And if you think you just heard a vague reference to the prior world of air travel, it's no accident.

Tomorrow afternoon we will hear the story of Jonah. Rereading it, and in the light of, or perhaps the shadow of Covid, I was struck by two themes: uncertainty and responses to it.

From the opening, Jonah's life is upended:

וַיְהִי֙ דְּבַר־יְהוָ֔ה אֶל־יוֹנָ֖ה בֶּן־אֲמִתַּ֑י לֵאמֹֽר׃
קוּם֙ לֵ֣ךְ אֶל־נִינְוֵ֔ה הָעִ֥יר הַגְּדוֹלָ֖ה וּקְרָ֣א עָלֶ֑יהָ כִּי־עָלְתָ֥ה רָעָתָ֖ם לְפָנָֽי׃

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:
Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.

Not a message you'd want to receive in your inbox, analogous in today's terms to being commanded to head for say, Kabul, or Copenhagen or even the Capital to warn its denizens that they face divine destruction for their sinfulness.

Jonah's upheavals continue. He encounters a mighty storm, a huge fish, a city that takes three days to walk from end to end, and plants that grow up and wither away overnight. And at each point, rather than acknowledging the reality in front of him, he instead runs away from or attempts to sleep through it. He sulks, frustrated with his circumstances and only eventually, and begrudgingly obeys God's command. And when the Ninevites repent, Jonah is greatly displeased, and asks God why he sent him to Nineveh in the first place because after all, God is compassionate and gracious.

The Ninevites, on the other hand, immediately accept the reality of Jonah's prophecy. Upon hearing his warning, they proclaim a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. They believe their simple actions can alter what appears to Jonah to be a pre-ordained future. If they do thing A, thing B will happen. They repent and God sees what they do and renounces his punishment. Rather than trying to pretend away, or ignore a threat, they act on it.

So it appears the Book of Jonah contrasts two different responses to unexpected developments: avoidance or resolve, with a preference for the latter. The book culminates with God's rebuke of

Jonah, hardly an upbeat conclusion, while Israel's enemy, the Ninevites are saved and thus have a happy ending. But is it so simple?

Scholars believe the Book of Jonah was written during the 5th or 4th century BC, around 200 years after Nineveh fell. So Nineveh did have a happy ending … unfortunately, their last one, while descendents of the self-declared Hebrew, Jonah were still around then and are still around today 2,500 years later. Perhaps then there is something more to the story. The Ninevites repent, yes, but their action is transactional, a kind of quid pro quo that can just as quickly be reversed. Jonah on the other hand, models a kind of resiliency. He experiences emotional highs and lows. He deals with fear, hunger, and disappointment. He argues with God. And through it all, he survives as we have survived, by maintaining his relationship with God despite his vicissitudes and eventually doing what should be done.

I recently read a book about a 16th century Chief Rabbi of Egypt, David Ibn Abi Zimra. He embraces and refines the Book of Jonah's answer to how to deal with uncertainty. He was asked a simple question: a Jewish inmate had been granted one day a year to leave prison to practice his religion and the prisoner inquired what day he should choose. Yom Kippur?, or maybe a day on which a Megilla is read? No, Rabbi Zimra replied, quote, "The very first mitzvah that you have the opportunity to observe, you should do. And it matters not whether this mitzvah seems minor or major for we never know the reward of the mitzvah." unquote. In other words, as soon as possible. Today, if feasible. And our actions should not be performed with the expectation of a reward, because we cannot ultimately know their impact. Indeed, in the end, what was the impact of the mitzvah of Jonah's prophesying to the Ninevites, for the Ninevites?

Stating the obvious, the last year and a half has been difficult. The world we knew, abruptly halted. Echoing the Ninevites's sackcloths, we donned facemasks. And like the inmate of Rabbi Zimra, we were metaphorically confined in the prison of our homes and confronted with the same question: when to come out? There is no and will be no all-clear shofar horn to blow. That said, KI leaned towards Rabbi Zimra's response: as soon as possible. We unbolted the doors deliberately and thoughtfully as soon as we could. As with Jonah, we've experienced ups and downs since relaunching services and reopening our campus. And like Jonah, we've been forced to adapt our actions as circumstances evolved. While we cannot know the eventual affect of our measures, we did our best, as a community, to adjust to a new and unexpected environment. Specific steps that come to mind include:

- Introducing Zoom and live streaming of all services
- Conducting online classes including Base programming, daily mishna learning and other offerings
- Transforming our Kiddush lunch program
- Launching a new Sustaining Share membership model, which early indications suggest, have increased our membership by 26 including 10 families.
- Ongoing Social Action initiatives including Covid Care and Vaccination facilitation.
- And safely reopening and staying open for daily minyan, Shabbat and Holiday Services since late last summer.

So as we hope and pray to be written down in the Book of Life for another year, may our collective actions have even more meaningful and positive impacts on the lives of the members of our community and the wider world.

And while on the subject of books, we're at the point where after talking Torah, or at least this year, the Prophets, and then trumpeting all the wonderful things KI is and does, the president is meant to talk around, but not directly about, the importance of making sure our financial books are, so to speak, inscribed in black.

This year, a new approach. No mentioning words like money, support, fundraising, and donations. Instead, as it's the eve of the most solemn day of the year, and decorum dictates serious conversation on a topic dignified and appropriate for the mood and gravity of the setting, I would like to raise a matter too often ignored in public forums and only spoken about in mushed tones around the kitchen table. A subject which I hope will bear fruit. I'm talking about:

Bananas. Yes, Bananas.

If you may, consider this a banana appeal. Now, more than ever, your bananas help nurture KI. Bananas help feed the hungry mouths of our creditors. Bananas help smooth the cost of hiring green staff and maintaining our spot-on experienced clergy and professionals. Bananas help KI split the ground running on new initiatives. So please, don't desert us.

Last week, a friend asked me if he should keep his hand in his pocket during my Kol Nidre message. To him and all here, I say, "Take that banana out of your pocket!" Even a small one can make a big difference. In fact, use your Ninevetian agency to donate a whole bunch. Y'onah not gonna regret it. The time is ripe. Go bananas and think of KI. And remember:

Bananas don't grow on trees.

May the new year bring sweetness, delight, good health, good humor, and after this, I'm sure some of you are thinking, a new KI president.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

Edited out:

For a real world example of this spirit in action, consider this past Rosh HaShana. At the last minute, Rabbi Starr who was meant to lead the Social Hall service in-person was unable to attend. This meant quickly changing course and reworking the technology to enable Rabbi Starr to lead from home. More importantly, and as an illustration of how we come together as a community, participants volunteered to take the lead. As the service progressed, the honors of opening and closing the ark, reading the blessings, and lifting and wrapping the scrolls were

distributed amongst everyone in the room: “Who would like to read the blessing for our country?” Hands were raised and someone stepped forward. Who can help change the placards indicating where we are in the service? Unasked, a member took it on. When the teen takeover didn’t happen on schedule, the service order was altered to integrate their D’vars as if the timing of the talks had been right on schedule. All an example of KI improvisation and community in action responding to unexpected change. Perfect like the Nivevites behavior after Jonah delivered his prophecy? No, but like Jonah’s descendants, we’re still here.