Vayechi 5786

Shabbat Shalom. Happy New Year.

Hold on, is it proper for Jews to wish one another a happy new year in September *and* January, or just in September? Given that we wished one another a Shanah Tovah in September, what is this week all about?

You may know that January is named for the Roman god Janus, the two-faced god of doorways, beginnings and transitions. According to Rabbi Google, in 46 BCE, Julius Ceasar made January 1 the start of the year, but by the 1500's the Julian calendar had fallen about ten days out of sync with the solar year, and Pope Gregory XIII instituted the Gregorian calendrical reform in 1582 to correct the drift and to re-establish January 1 as New Years Day.

And for Jews this means…?

Our parasha has an episode that I think might help us figure it out.
We're reading from Vayechi this week, the very last parasha in the book of Genesis, which means we're saying goodbye to our matriarchs and patriarchs. Vayechi, which means "he lived," is referring to Jacob, also known as Israel of course, who breathes his last in our parasha.

After living 17 years in the land of Egypt and 147 years total, Jacob dies, and Joseph fulfills his pledge to bring his father's body up to Canaan to the Cave of Machpelah, to bury him along with Abraham and Sarah, Rebecca and Isaac, and Leah. (Rachel was not buried in the cave, but instead is buried where she died along the road during their journey, which is why today you will find Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem and the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron).

Joseph and his brothers journey to Canaan to bury their father, and when they get back to Egypt the
Torah tells us something unusual.

וַיִּרְאוּ אֲחֵי־יוֹסֵף כִּי־מֵת אֲבִיהֶם

Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead

What does this mean? What did they see?

"…and they said 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all of the harm we did him?" So they sent this message to Joseph, 'Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father's [house].' And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, “We are prepared to be your slaves.”

Now, this is probably a lie. We have no indication that Jacob ever learned of their treacherous act against Joseph. What caused this outburst?

According to Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, a midrashic collection composed between 350 and 400 CE, on the way back from burying their father, Joseph took a detour to visit the infamous pit. He stood over it for some time. His brothers thought he was scheming his revenge. But instead he was offering a blessing to Gd -- thanking Gd for his deliverance.

In their misunderstanding of Joseph’s mindset, the brothers come up with a story invoking their father’s memory to appease him and protect themselves. But standing at that pit Joseph was not filled with bitterness. Instead, he was remembering that Gd had a plan for him and that low moment represented the beginning of his mission.

Joseph tells his brothers that they have nothing to fear, that he was sent to Egypt for a greater purpose, to save many lives. He reassures them that he will care for them and their descendants. He speaks kindly to them.

Here in this exchange between Joseph and his brothers, I see that we have a way for Jews to think about the relationship between Rosh Hashanah and January 1.

The brothers’ speech to Joseph was a sub-optimal attempt to do teshuva. They were probably lying about their father, but the essence of what they said to Joseph was true. They acknowledged for the first time that they harmed him. They called their actions an “offense” that amounted to “guilt,” and they asked Joseph for his forgiveness. The text says that first they sent him a message, and then they went to him themselves and flung themselves before him in contrition. They acknowledged what they did and that it was wrong, they demonstrated remorse, they apologized directly, they asked for forgiveness, and they even offered recompense – they offered to become his slaves. This is teshuva. And Joseph forgives them. That is Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Aseret Yamei Teshuva, the ten days of teshuva, in all of their healing power. We see that it works: it makes repair among the brothers, and they live out the rest of their lives in peace.

But that’s not the whole story. Alongside the healing and repair of teshuva, something else is going on. It’s what happens inside of Joseph. Joseph, looking at the pit, recognizes not grievance but calling. He would never have chosen to be sold into slavery by his brothers, but looking at the site of their depravity he sees instead his mission. What if we were to approach the relationship between High Holy Days and the secular new year in this way?

We have a season to dwell on all that is wrong and broken and needs repair. There’s a time and place for reflection and healing. The work of teshuva is never done – we reflect on our sins every single weekday in the amidah all year long – but our calendar gives us forty days (from

the first of Elul to Yom Kippur) to make it our primary focus. What if in the months from Yom Kippur to the secular New Year, we allow all of that reflection to crystallize into clarity of purpose? Given the state of brokenness and repair in our lives, in the world, given what we've come to see as our role in it, what are we here to do? What is my mission? And then on January 1, we move into action. What if we could find within the conditions of our lives and our world the opportunity to rise to our highest selves? To hear the call of purpose and to meet the call?

What if Rosh Hashanah is the holiday of repair and January 1 is when we put it all into action? Like the after-booster on a rocket. We aim and launch during the High Holy Days, and three months later we get a boost. What did I learn about myself this fall? What am I going to do about it now?

We can make a long list of all that is wrong and falling apart in our world right now. And we can also see within it an opportunity to be the humans we've always wanted to be.
On Rosh Hashanah, I gave a sermon urging us to do just that. But how do we do that? How do we rise to the challenges of our time? How do we live the lives we were meant to live, be the people we are meant to be? I made the case in that sermon that Judaism can offer us the structure we need. I spelled it out a little bit in the brief time available in a Rosh Hashanah sermon, but if we're going to really try to do this together we need a lot more time.

So I'm going to be teaching a class this winter after Shabbat morning services, starting on Jan 24th at noon, based on a book by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg called *The Triumph of Life*. I think it's an important book, and even though I don't agree with everything in it and you won't either, I think it provides an excellent foundation for the conversation I think we need to have as a community about rethinking our relationship to Judaism. About reimagining what Judaism is and what it can look like in our lives. And to start to use the structures of Judaism to help each of us respond to this moment and be the humans we want to be. I hope that you'll join me in that conversation.

Because I believe that, like Joseph and his brothers, we have the ability to emerge from the work of teshuva with new clarity about who we are and why we are here, and we have the ability to translate those insights into the actions that make up our lives.

So that one day when we wish one another a Happy New Year twice, we know exactly what we mean.

Shabbat Shalom. Happy New Year.