

**A Great Year; A Lousy Year; Thank You!**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon**  
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**Rabbi Mark S. Glickman**

Tonight I would like to thank God for all of the wonderful things that have happened this past year – to me, and to the people I love. I thank God for the unspeakable joy of being able to stand next to my wife, Caron, and watch our kids thrive. For the thrill of having watched Taylor, our oldest, reach the age of 18 in one piece – a good guy despite our parenting – and go off to college to begin the next chapter of his life. And for the thrill of having watched our other three kids take huge steps in their own journeys toward becoming real mensches, as well. I thank God for this wonderful congregation that I feel so blessed to have the honor to serve; I thank God for the *other* wonderful congregation that I feel so blessed to have the honor to serve. Having grown up in Chicago, I thank God for this year's Cubs, and for the reminder they give me to never give up hope. I thank God for the moment when I saw Ron Newlun walk through the doors back there after his scary illness kept him away for so long. I thank God for the view of the mountains out our back window at home, for good wine, for capers – I *love* those things – and for those few delicious moments this year when I was able to drive along smooth wooded roads near here without being impeded by traffic. I thank God for the cool new GPS unit that Caron got me for Chanukah, and for the many other ways she keeps me on course even without electronic gadgets. I thank God for that sunset last summer when the orb of the sun seemed to have grown ten times bigger than it usually is, for the twenty seconds that a coyote trotted alongside my car as I drove down my road a few weeks ago, for the times when I made my wife and kids laugh because I was trying to make them laugh, and for sweet Shabbat afternoon naps. For all of these things and many more, I thank God from the bottom of my heart.

And I also thank God for all of the horrible things that have happened this year. For the tanking economy and rising gas prices, for reality television, for route 520 in the late afternoons. For hurricanes and floods, for the untimely deaths of the parents of a dear friend. For the time when I messed up my knee when I slipped while walking out to the hot-tub, for the hurt and the insult I felt when I realized that that coyote next to my car didn't seem interested in eating me at all. For the time when one of you said something hurtful to me without even realizing it, for the times when I said hurtful things without even realizing it, either. For broken relationships, for the sicknesses and injuries that cause people I love to hurt, for the toil of physical and emotional and spiritual healing. For all of these things and many more, I also thank God from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, I don't want any of those things to happen. I don't want the people I care about to suffer; I don't want relationships to break; I don't want to utter or to be the recipient of hurtful words. And in fact, a big part of me wants to tell God off for those things – it would be so sweet!

Maybe I'll do that someday, but not now. Now, I'm going to force myself to thank God for the bad, as well as for the good. Why? There are several reasons. The first is that the pain that these

experiences cause, the deep feelings and emotions that they elicit, the agony that they produce, are only possible because of our greatness as human beings.

We each do have our own greatness. Though none of us is perfect, there are parts of each of us that are sweet, and loving, and noble, and hopeful for the future. And I think that the times we hurt tend to be those when life attacks those decent, righteous parts of us. We each, for example, have long lists of goals we want to accomplish each day. Some are noble – visiting an ailing friend, hugging our kids, working on an important social cause. Others are more mundane – taking out the garbage, paying the bills, vacuuming.

They're all good goals, and they're all important, and they're all impossible to do when you're sitting in a traffic jam on 520! And the reason that it's so frustrating to be in that traffic is that we have so many things we feel committed to accomplishing that we can't do while sitting in our car.

We have the capacity to love, and we treasure our relationships with other people. And when those relationships break, a part of us dies. We yearn to connect with others – we want to build new friendships, to feel at home in our communities – and an unkind or thoughtless comment from another can slap us down in that quest.

And why do we weep when someone close to us dies? We weep only because we loved them.

An old marine once told me that pain is a form of weakness. I disagree. I think that pain is the result of the very best of what it means to be human. We suffer only because we have hopes that can be dashed, dreams that can be ruined, and loves that can be lost. Hopes, dreams, loves – these are what make us hurt, and they are also what make us so very great. Would any of us have it any other way?

Think for a moment of the people you love most deeply. You know as well as any of us that someday that relationship as it is now will end. Maybe there will be an argument or a betrayal, resulting in a sudden break. Maybe the two of you will drift apart slowly. Or maybe you will remain connected way into the distant future, all the way until the day one of you dies.

We're never sure how any of our relationships will end, but we know for sure that, someday, end they will. And yet, most of us willingly connect with others, anyway. Knowing full well that loving another individual probably means that one or both of you will someday suffer the pain of loss, we reach out to them anyway, and we hold on tight. We know that, along with the joy and the brightness that another person can bring, will also, most likely, come difficulty and pain and sadness. And we know that those experiences will hurt for the very same reasons that we wanted to connect in the first place – because we loved them, and so treasured their presence in our lives. To avoid the hurt we'd need to refuse to love. So, we love; so, we connect; so we hurt. Would any of us have it any other way?

I thank God I've felt anger, for it reminds me that I have values. I thank God that I have hurt, for it reminds me that I can feel. I thank God that I have wept over broken bonds with other people, for it reminds me that I have loved.

There is another reason that I thank God for life's pain, and that is that I need that pain. I don't need it in a masochistic sense, of course. I need it, just as I need life's joy, to craft me into a full person. I suppose it's possible to go through life without pain, and still come out good in the end, but I think that, for most of us, we need both joy and suffering to become good, strong individuals.

A colleague of mine whom I've known for many years seems to have had one of those charmed, painless lives. He grew up in an upper-middle-class, well adjusted home, he's good looking, he wakes up with his hair already combed, he's nice, he stays trim and healthy without working out or dieting, his clothes never wrinkle, he now serves a large congregation and earns a huge salary, and Newsweek magazine just named him *one of the ten most influential congregational rabbis in the country*.

I joke, of course. He is a good guy, and he is a very talented rabbi. It's just that, I don't know that I'd ever want him to be *my* rabbi, because there seems to be something about him that's just not quite complete. *My* teachers, the ones who have truly helped transform my life, tend to be people who can bring me what they have learned in a lifetime of all kinds of experiences both good and bad, not those who have always lived lives of ease and happiness.

In the Torah, we read of our ancestor, Jacob, who lay down to sleep one night and suddenly found himself struggling in the dark with ... with *someone* – he never really knew who (the text just calls him an *Ish*, a man). In the morning, Jacob found that his hip had gotten wrenched in the struggle. His opponent gave him a new name. No longer would he be called Jacob – which means heel – but rather Israel – God wrestler. Wounded and transformed, Jacob limps off into the dawn to pursue his destiny as a father of our people.

I think that in order to have a firm footing in life, we each need to have a moment like the one Jacob had on that lonely night so many centuries ago. We each need to endure the dark times, struggling with demons who often seem to come out of nowhere and whom we rarely can really identify. I think that we each need to wrestle in order to be able to pursue and fulfill our destiny. And, yes, I think that we each need to be wounded in the process. If somebody tells you that they've grown up without the hurt – that they've never entered that dark nighttime, that struggle, that they've never sustained that deep wound – then, if I were you, I wouldn't believe them. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that that person is either lying, repressing painful memories, or simply hasn't really grown up yet.

I've gone through some of those times myself, and I would guess that most of you have, too. I would never want to repeat them, I'm angry that I had to have them, and my heart goes out to those in similar straits now. And yet, I think that most of the strengths that I have as a human being are due at least in part to my having endured those difficult times. Our goodness comes not from our joy only, but also from the pain that we all must experience. Would any of us have it any other way?

The words of the prophet, Isaiah, ring true. He praised God for being "*Yotzeir or uvorei choshech, oseh shalom uvorei et hara*. The One who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil." The one God created them all.

In the Torah portion we'll read tomorrow, God, to our horror, tells Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham sets off with Isaac and two servants for the mountain where God told him to go, and when the foursome arrives, Abraham turns to the servants and tells them to wait at the foot of the mountain while he and Isaac go to the top to "worship."

"Worship?" the ancient rabbis asked. "What's this about worship? Abraham wasn't going up there to pray, but to sacrifice his son. Did Abraham lie to his servants?" The rabbis answer is that, no, Abraham didn't lie. He knew what was going to happen. God had just asked him to perform one of the most horrible acts imaginable, and when he climbed that mountain, he was going to perform that act, *and* utter a prayer to God – which is just what the rabbis suggest that he did.

They went on to say that God later rewarded Abraham *not* for having almost sacrificed his son, but for having uttered the prayer. Here he is, in an unspeakably terrible situation, knowing that it was God who told him to do this horrible thing. Does he cry out about the unfairness of it all? Does he bewail the horror? No! Instead, he acknowledges that life is always a mixed bag of the splendid and the horrible, the joyous and the agonizing. Demonstrating his faith that somehow, even with the pain, this will all work out for the best in the end, Abraham praises God. And it is for this act that God renews his covenant with Abraham, and, by extension, allowed our people to continue coming to be.

And so the story goes. Later, Abraham almost sacrifices his son on that mountain, but at the last second, an angel calls out and tells him to stop and sacrifice a nearby, conveniently placed ram, instead. Before he leaves, Abraham names that place, "Adonai Yireh – God Sees," because, the Torah tells us, God appeared on the mountain.

But wait. God appeared on the mountain? God told Abraham to *go* to the mountain, but it was an *angel* who told Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac. God never really did appear on the mountain.

Sometimes God appears amidst lightening and thunder, and at other times God appears in utter absence of anything good or redemptive or Godly. We see God most when God shows up, and we see God most in the black hole God leaves behind when completely absent.

Judaism calls upon us to live lives not only of joy, but of something even more important – holiness. And to get there – to get to a life lived well and nobly and significantly, to get to a life lived the way we are supposed to live it – takes far more than happy experiences. It takes a big, messy jumble of all kinds of experiences – good and bad, joyful and painful, exalting and humbling. And maybe, just maybe, if we can sort them all out well and make something good of them, then we can turn out the way we should. When that happens, our lives will be far more than happy – they'll be good, they'll be sacred, they'll be just right.

So thank you God. Thank you for all that is sweet in my life, and for all that is bitter. Thank you for my successes, and thank you for my failures. Thank you for the times when I love being a rabbi, and thank you for the moments that I hate it. Thank you for my kids during the times they make me proud, and thank you my kids at all of those other times, too. Thank you for the blissful opportunities I have to dance at weddings and to celebrate the lives of newborn babies, and thank you also for broken hearts and shattered souls. Thank you for my joys, God, and thank you for my pain.

For I am learning that life is never just one thing, that we experience it best when we experience it all, and that, ultimately, the simple blessing of being alive, O God, is the greatest gift you give.

Shanah Tovah.