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The Lifeguard

Shana tovah, my Rosh Hashanah friends --

It's just incredible to be here together, outdoors, on the New Year, in a new way. So much has changed since last Rosh Hashanah, and so much more has changed since Rosh Hashanah 5780, the last time we were together, in the great hall. We've been called to care for one another in a deeper way.

But let's begin by taking a break from all of that. I invite you now to picture a lifeguard. What do you think of?

I'm thinking of a person in a red swimsuit, with a whistle around their neck to remind people to be safe, a person sitting atop a tall chair, with a view of the ocean, an acute ability to spot the start of danger. The lifeguard knows how to detect a ripcurrent, or spot a person who is struggling to stay afloat, and then acts quickly, using their tools and their skills to perform a rescue. Lifeguards seem like Gods among people.

It takes a special kind of person to choose this work. Yes, some lifeguards are high school and college students who want to stay in shape, be by the water, and get paid. But they are also willing to act with courage, to stand up and say, *hineini*, here I am, when there is a need.

Let's zoom out, though, from this lifeguard for a moment.

When we zoom out, we can see that the lifeguard isn't in their tall chair alone. Some lifeguard chairs at the beach have space for two people, and there typically is another guard chair not too far away. They work together as part of a team.

After all, no one just magically knows CPR or how to spot a rip current: people take a class, and learn from people who themselves learned from someone else. This lifesaving knowledge passes down a chain, *l'dor vador*, one generation of helpers to the next. And when new information is discovered, they begin to teach that as well! Not only that, lifeguards develop and practice their skills. They spend hours running, swimming, doing push ups, testing each other on how quickly they can pull someone out of the water.

And when we Zoom out even further from the squad of guards, we realize that the team is much bigger. How many of us have a little sibling, or have a child or a cousin or a friend's child? (Give me a nod, or wave your hand). And do you let little ones play in water unattended? Of course not! You stay close by, supervising.

In other words, each of us are on the life guard's team. Or maybe, the lifeguards are on our team. Or maybe it doesn't matter whose team it is, because we are all on one team. The only way to opt out is by staying totally off the beach.

And yet, we treasure our time by the beach because we know that though the water is beautiful, refreshing, and overall enjoyable, the potential for danger remains. Not just the danger of a sunburn or a jellyfish sting, something inconvenient that goes away - but potential for the greatest loss of all: the loss of life.

On the High Holy Days, we pause from the rhythm of the world to ask ourselves big questions: how do we want to live our lives? What are we proud of, and what do we hope to be proud of next year? How must we shift our behavior, what behaviors must we continue?

The Un'tenah Tokef prayer, which we recited earlier together, details this potential for great hope, and great loss. And we know that *t'filah*, meaningful self reflection, *t'shuvah*, return to the best in ourselves; and *tzedakah*, working to ensure justice and fairness, are ways for us to mitigate the harshness of our world.

But the Unetaneh Tokef poem also speaks to our reality in a different way, reminding us that no one among us will live forever.

Adam ysodo meafar, v'sofe le'afar - We who are human - our origin is dust, and so is our end.

We .. are like broken vessels, like withered grass, like a flower that must fade, a shadow moving on, a cloud passing by.

We don't know what dangers or what beauty this year will bring, but we do know that each of us at some point, must retire from this earth. The poetry of Unetaneh Tokef invites us to recall that in our unknown allotted time on this earth, we each have a role to play. Each of us can be a lifeguard: observing the world's conditions, and deciding how best to respond. We can learn and practice life saving exercises, both for times of acute danger (like us wearing masks right now), and for the everyday (like wearing sunscreen and preventing skin cancer).

Like a lifeguard, none of us can totally change the conditions - strong tides, winds and rains will always be a part of the natural world. But when we observe large changes (like a pattern of bigger storms wrought by climate change), or people in need of immediate help, we can spring into action. We can rely on our team - both those of us in lifeguard uniforms (like those Temple Micah members who are part of Sukkat Shalom, helping to resettle Afghan families), and those of us who are just on the beach.

The truth is simple: each of us can be a lifeguard. We are all on the same team. It's up to us to act like it. Shanah tovah.