

Thursday, October 3, 2024  
Rosh Hashanah Day Sermon

“Setting Down Our Tools”  
- Rabbi Barry Diamond

It's August 1949, almost exactly seventy-five years ago, and it's hot and windy in the Montana mountains. A bolt of lightning strikes the dry grass, igniting a wildfire. In just a few minutes it begins to spread across the grass and tree-covered hills. Those of us who have lived in the Conejo Valley for many years know the sense of foreboding when smelling smoke carried on the wind. In response to the danger, the forest service deploys a group of smokejumpers, fifteen young men and their supervisor who parachute into the area so they can control the wildfire early. The group finds themselves on the ridge of a hill and descend into a ravine called Mann Gulch. At the bottom of the small valley, they plan to clear a strip of grass, a firebreak, so when the fire, burning down the opposite side of the hill and reaches the cleared area, it will burn out. But as they are descending, they don't notice the winds shifting direction. Instead of blowing the flames away from them, they are being blown towards them. Instead of slowly burning down the opposite hill and into the gulch, the fire suddenly jumps over the valley and is heading up the other side, directly towards them -- and fast. At the age of thirty-three, Wagner Dodge is the older,

experienced leader of the smoke jumpers, and he is the first to recognize the danger. As they continue to descend the side of the gulch, he sees the flames coming up towards them. "We're in trouble boys. We gotta run up this hill." The flames rushing towards them were thirty feet high, higher than the roof of our sanctuary, but with tens of pounds of protective gear and firefighting equipment, they were retreating up the gulch too slowly. Wagner Dodge yells, "Drop all your tools, boys. We gotta go!" But these boys were not professional firefighters accustomed to taking direction, they were just athletic young men in their late teens and early twenties who were fighting fires as a summer job. But those boys, fully believed, that the best tools they had to fight fires were an axe and shovel. Without them, they were just a bunch of guys. But if they had a moment to reflect on their situation, fully assess their predicament, they would have realized that the tools they considered vital for keeping wildfires at bay were weighing them down, contributing to their failure, and endangering their lives.

We all carry tools in our lives, don't we, tools that help us to succeed, or thrive, or just enjoy life. Sometimes our tools are tangible, like the smartphones in our pockets or the laptops at our desks, and sometimes they are intangible, like the stories we tell about ourselves or our very beliefs about

our lives and the world. Wisdom traditions from around the world explore intangible beliefs, these mental tools that we carry around with us. Buddhist business coach Marshall Goldsmith examines a number of these core beliefs utilized by successful people that actually keep them trudging up a burning hill. One belief is that “I need to be right,” which is helpful if we are an attorney fighting for our client, but not as helpful when talking to our spouse or siblings. Another belief is that “I need to add value.” This is a generally helpful belief that, in whatever situation we are in, we should be helpful and contribute. But if we contribute too much, we could deprive others of their opportunity to contribute and shut down opportunities for everyone to learn and grow.

One of the beliefs that became popular in the 1980s and 90s is the importance of self-esteem for our students. Kids with high self-esteem are more resilient, make more independent decisions, and tend to have positive relationships with peers and adults.

But the same self-esteem that can make our kids confident can also make many of them insufferable if they were unaccustomed to having their ideas challenged. Those of us who remember the California energy shortage of the early 2000s may remember that it was manufactured by a Texas company

called Enron. Before that company went bankrupt, it was led by people who described themselves as the smartest people in the room. It was self-esteem run amok. We also believed that if kids struggled, it could damage their self-esteem. As a result, well-meaning teachers and parents tried to smooth out the bumps and fill in the potholes of life so they would not have their self-esteem threatened. What we didn't fully understand was that overcoming reasonable challenges was, is, and always will be, one of the main ways our kids – and we – develop self-esteem. Sometimes the tools we carry become a burden to us, and one we may pass on to our children.

Carrying our tools when they are no longer helpful is not only a modern problem. We find it in the Torah portion often read on Rosh Hashanah.

Abraham, the man chosen by God to be the father of the Jewish people, was known for his faith and confidence in God. However, he clung to that faith when God was ordering him to sacrifice his own son. His blind faith in following God, that was critical in getting Abraham to uproot his family and move to the Promised Land, did not serve him well in this situation. When he should have put down his tool of blind faith and challenged God's instructions, he continued to carry his tool of faith. (Thank God for angelic intervention, which we really can't count on today!)

The fact is it's hard to put down our tools. It's difficult to set aside beliefs or practices that may have helped us to succeed but now actually hold us back.

We must ask, what prevents us from putting down our tools, giving up our old beliefs or behaviors about the world? The challenge we often face is that we have faith in what we did to get here. It takes an incredible amount of effort to challenge that faith. Few of us are going to expend that effort unless we have deep trust in the people asking us to act differently and change our approach.

We must learn to hear alternative perspectives. We can't just hear them to shoot them down, we must truly listen to them and deeply consider them.

We need people with wisdom whom we trust. I have a colleague named Mark Kaiserman who is always willing to engage in discussions about the most sensitive topics of our time. He shares his thoughts, and I share mine. He never judges me for holding half-baked thoughts; instead, he just challenges my beliefs. He gently pokes at them and asks me to think again. He has helped me to put down some of my tools, to change some of my beliefs because, while I do not always agree with him, I fundamentally trust him. I wonder how many of us have a group of people whom we can trust to explore our own ideas without being harshly judged.

Sadly, the smokejumpers of Mann Gulch lack that trust. As they are running up the hill, trying to escape the army of flames behind them, Wagner Dodge realizes that they are not going to make it; he then does something somewhat shocking. With the flames at his back, Dodge takes out his box of matches and starts lighting the grass that is in front of him. It catches fire immediately, and he yells to the other smokejumpers to follow him. You can imagine these twenty-year-olds seeing a thirty-three-year-old igniting his only escape route, and they think, “This guy has lost his marbles. Keep running from the flames behind us.”

But their lack of trust in Dodge costs them dearly. With the now burnt patch of grass in front of him, Dodge runs into his newly formed escape route. He lays on his stomach and covers his exposed neck with his hands, as the flames behind him overtake and ultimately go around the burnt sanctuary where he lay. If anyone else had had enough faith in him to listen, consider, and change their approach, they might still be alive today.

One of the greatest values of being part of a Reform Jewish community is that we encourage you to do so. We want you to have trusting relationships with one another, where we turn down our judgement and turn up our exploration

of new tools we can use to live our lives. One of the reasons that we promote our TAEngage small groups is that they provide a small group of people with whom we can connect and have fun. Whether it's a wine-tasting group or photography; it's all good. But some of the groups go deeper. They become each other's Wagner Dodges or Mark Kaisermans, people with whom they can talk about how they are living their lives and whether they are carrying the right tools. For five years, a group called Aging Gracefully has been meeting to discuss the ups and downs, the challenges and joys in this stage of life. Another group has been gathering for the same amount of time to talk about politics with one another, openly and respectfully. Sandy Greenstein, former president of the Mussar Institute, has been leading discussions about the virtues by which we live our lives. We all know of the myriads of verboten topics that we need to avoid in polite company, but those are the very topics we need to talk about, openly and with our judgement dialed down to one, so we can decide which of our tools we should carry and which to set down for good.

As we gather here today, let us take a moment to reflect on the tools we carry—those beliefs, habits, and stories that have served us well in the past but may no longer be leading us to where we need to go. Like the

smokejumpers of Mann Gulch, we are all on a journey, sometimes facing unexpected and intense challenges. In those moments, it's crucial to ask ourselves: Are we holding on to tools that no longer serve us? Are we open to growth? Are we willing to trust others enough to let go and try something new?

In our community here at Temple Adat Elohim, we are blessed with the opportunity to engage in these kinds of explorations together. Whether through our TAEngage groups, our Shabbat services, or simply in conversation with one another, we have the chance to listen, to challenge, and to grow. Let's be the kind of community where trust runs deep, where harsh judgment is set aside, and where we can safely explore which tools to keep and which to leave behind.

As we move into this new year, may we all find the courage to reassess our tools, to trust in the wisdom of those around us, and to step into the future with open hearts and minds. Shana Tova.