

Harry Podolsky
High Holidays 2016

It is an honor to have the opportunity to speak to you all today. I'm actually a Rosh Hashanah baby - born on the second day. My mother loves to tell and retell the repercussions of having a baby on RH: there were no Jewish doctors at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan that day - *and* the ice chip machine was on the fritz. My "public speaking career" began 11 years ago on Shabbat Shuva at my Bar Mitzvah, on this very *bimah*.

I was 8 when my family moved here. Some faces I see at Shul today are the first people I met! It was a blessing to find such an enthusiastic Jewish community in my new town. Another blessing that I have found here is a passion for the ocean, and for sailing. There is something about the feeling of autonomy when I am directing my own course out there that pulls me out of day to day life, and harkens back to a primordial experience of wayfinding. Recently I am struck by a realization of the ways that this interest in voyaging has informed by my own understanding and interpretation of our shared history as Jews. *Jews are true voyagers, in many more ways than just the geographic sense.* We have crossed tens of thousands of miles over dozens of generations, experiencing victories and prosperity punctuated by setback and tragedy, to reach our current homes. These stories are found in the last century as much as they are in the Torah. Our journey has defined who we are, and who we want to be as a people - and the journey continues.

We are not the only tribe who traveled far in order to define themselves. I would like to share the story of another with you briefly. My own experience with them has brought me great pride and wonder as a Jew. In college I spent time studying in the Hawaiian Islands. I learned that the Hawaiian people had reached their home by travelling thousands of miles in small canoes. They set out without any *direct knowledge of the existence of the islands* - and without navigational aids like the sextant. They built a prosperous home there. The evidence suggests they were escaping conflict and over population in Polynesia, seeking a new home. This image of a few determined people choosing to strike out into the unknown and finding a homeland resonates with me as a powerful comparison to our own journey!

Millenia later, westerners arrived in the islands. Over decades, plantation owners and repressive interests took over as the Hawaiian people were decimated by disease. The Hawaiian language was banned in public schools until as late as 1937. But this proud people, their numbers reduced and their culture repressed, maintained their identity in private and carried on the practices that they held sacred - just as we have time and time again.

50 years ago, these people reclaimed the ancient navigation techniques that guided them to the islands in the first place. Proving this method of exploration, often doubted in the west, ignited a generation of young Hawaiians to learn navigation techniques, and hold their culture and identity in high esteem once again.

Now, here is where my experience comes in. *Hokulea* did not stop with Pacific voyages. As some of you may know, for the last two years she has been making her way around the globe, with plans to circumnavigate and return to Hawaii in June 2017! Circling the globe, on a 50 foot canoe, without using navigational aids - this is unprecedented in the history of humankind! I had the great honor to be in attendance when *Hokulea* sailed into Somes Sound,

and pulled up to the dock just 40 miles or so from here. I met her crew and ran my fingers along her hull. This group of cultural ambassadors, spanning three generations, is on a voyage to forge bonds of fellowship between different peoples all across the world. The act of connecting with people here in our region has an added level of symbolism relevant during these high holidays, because many of the people who perpetrated terrible crimes on the Hawaiian Kingdom were plantation owners from New England! This act of acceptance and sharing was radical forgiveness in my mind - and the importance of that act continues to leave me in wonder.

I realize my words deal predominantly with another people - and on this Rosh Hashanah I haven't spoken directly about Judaism or my faith at all! I felt more than a little trepidation as I drafted this, not sure if it would be entirely appropriate - if I have offended, consider this my first apology. Please also hear this: it is truth when I say my study of the Hawaiian people's journey, and the opportunity to meet with their representatives in the midst of a voyage of true biblical scale - has enhanced and strengthened my understanding of our own proud story, our many struggles, and our continual redemption. **I'shanah tovah tikatevu ve techatemu**