

In the Eye of the Storm: Jewish Wisdom for Turbulent Times

Rosh Hashanah 5777

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Many of us have favorite “I can’t believe that happened to us on the High Holy Days” stories. Some of you may remember the Rosh Hashanah when we accidentally switched the covers on the two Torah scrolls, recognizing only as we set out to read from Genesis that the scroll we had before us was set to the Book of Numbers. Or perhaps, even more memorable, the Yom Kippur when our plumbing system decided to cease functioning and re-route all of its contents to the floor of the education wing. That year we packed ourselves like sardines into the Chapel for Neilah services. If the old adage “People plan, and God laughs” is true, then God inevitably gets some good entertainment on the *Chagim*.

Hashanah services solo in the midst of a hurricane. Here’s how it happened: My first student pulpit brought me to the Jewish community of St. Croix, US Virgin Islands (I know, tough life). And my first Rosh Hashanah leading all the services was also my maiden trip out to the island.

During the initial leg of my journey, from Philadelphia to Puerto Rico, I was struck by how empty the plane was. “Gosh,” I thought, “this is terrific! Lots of space to stretch out and put some finishing touches on my Yom Kippur remarks. I wonder if it will always be this pleasant a flight?”

Then I landed.

A frighteningly garish orange-yellow haze tinged the sky. The sea tossed rough, dark waves. My host said, “Well, we were wondering if you already knew, or if we should try to reach you before you left. A hurricane is coming. Right now it’s rated a category four, and we are right in its path.” At this point I might mention that my host lived in company housing for the island’s oil refinery – a cozy mobile home park.

So as we lit Friday night candles, the evacuation orders came in: All residents were to secure what belongings they could, and seek cover in a safe structure in a dormitory on the refinery grounds. For safety, we blew out the Shabbat candles before we left, but as we entered the refinery a very different kind of twin flame greeted us: Flames from the refinery’s smoke stacks shot high into the sky in an attempt to lower the refinery tanks’ storage levels before the storm hit.

The next afternoon, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the storm began to bear down. My host took two large industrial bolts and soldered onto them the Hebrew year and a swirl design. Voila -- the bolts became our Rosh Hashanah candlesticks. In a windowless bunker, we lit candles, made Kiddush, blessed bread and went to our quarters to wait out the first round of the storm. I barely slept that night as winds and rains howled outside. You could feel the vibrations through the walls.

In the morning -- the first day of the New Year -- we were indeed in the eye of the hurricane. The freakishly blue skies and calm weather gave enough time for me to connect with other Jewish families seeking shelter on the grounds of the refinery. We gathered the children close, and as I blew shofar, it sounded out our relief mingled with joy -- the storm had lost intensity right before landfall. No lives had been lost on our island. In that moment, the call of the shofar united us, gave us shared meaning and hope.

Although it is hurricane season once again, none are bearing down -- at least right now -- on Chapel Hill. But we come to this New Year amidst a different kind of tumult: Rising populism, nationalism and isolationism at home and abroad. Terrorism, volatile climate, and violence fraying our communities; campaign rhetoric that generates far more heat than light. What might we rely on when the world feels like a storm swirling around us? What can be our compass and guide in turbulent times?

Over the summer I took time to delve, once again, into a survey of Jewish history. We are a people who have miraculously survived incredible circumstances; and I would submit this is due in no small measure to our tradition's way of seeing and being in the world -- the strength of our values, teachings and rituals.

This morning I would like to highlight three essential elements of Jewish thought and action that help us navigate difficult times. And though these are surely not exclusive to Judaism, our tradition embeds them in a system of meaning and gives them uniquely Jewish expression.

One: We not only need one another -- we are obligated to one another.

Right now, I want to invite everyone who is able to stand up and take a look around. And if standing is a difficulty, just take a moment to join with others and look around at everyone who is gathered here today. If you are comfortable, take a moment to greet the person next to you, sitting by you, maybe in front or behind you. Great. Now you are welcome to take a seat.

You could have stayed home and read prayers on your own. Or slept in and (heaven forbid) live-streamed a service from the Internet. But all of us here this morning are able to come to synagogue, and all of us chose to come: We needed to be here with others to bring in the holiday.

We live in a culture that prizes autonomy and individualism. And though Judaism certainly honors the individual and the sacredness and uniqueness of each soul, ultimately it asserts again and again the primacy of community. The laws of a minyan encode this in the DNA of Jewish life. Only with a quorum of 10 can we recite specific prayers that declare God's holiness. The message of minyan, then, is that we most fully experience God's presence in our lives when we are with each other.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of the world. There is a lot of goodness in the story of creation in Genesis: after adding each new element to the world, God "sees that it is good." As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, the first time the words "not good" appear in the Torah is Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone."

An elderly relative made a solo trip down from the Northeast to visit our family this summer. We were worried when we heard that he had somehow gotten confused and missed his exit on the highway, and then arrived at the airport too late to catch his flight. When he finally arrived, I reasonably expected to hear a tale of the inconvenience, frustration and difficulty of his travels. Instead, his first words were, "This was a wonderful, amazing experience. So many people were so kind and helpful. A police officer directing traffic at the terminal went inside to get my boarding pass, then escorted me so I could find the right place to park. On the shuttle, a gentleman stayed with me until I got to the right gate, going past his own stop."

Helping to make a minyan fulfills a Jewish obligation; but as my relative's story suggests, there are also simple acts in the course of living each day when our interdependence is clear. The 20th-century French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, goes so far as to say that we come into being – we constitute a self, a sense of me or I – only when we recognize our obligation to another. And it is in that encounter, when we truly see the face of another, that we experience a trace of God.

But is it enough simply to recognize an obligation to be with one another? Or is there something, too, about the way that we orient ourselves to our encounters with others? These questions bring me to the second element I would like to emphasize this morning:

Two: Judaism teaches us to cultivate an open heart.

Rabbi Josh Fiegelson turns to our biblical tradition to teach about matters of the heart. Consider, says Fiegelson, young King Solomon. One evening God appears to him in a dream and asks him what he desires. Understand that Solomon could ask for anything here – and we can imagine there might be some things high up on the young King’s wish-list that God might provide: Endless wealth, an unbeatable army, the complete destruction of his enemies. But here, instead, is Solomon’s request:

“Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant King in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a *lev shomeah*, a listening heart, to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.”

In his humility, Solomon asks for a listening heart. One that is open, resilient and capable of hearing the people. And God responds to Solomon’s request: “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have you asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a *lev chacham v’navon*, a wise and listening heart.” (I Kings 3:13)

An open, listening heart becomes not just a wellspring that connects us to divine compassion, but the very source of great wisdom in how to act in the world.

You may have heard about the way that Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, a Modern Orthodox rabbi, and his congregation in Washington DC responded to the horrific events at Pulse nightclub in Orlando earlier this year. Like many in the Jewish community, they got word of the tragedy at the same time they were celebrating the festival of Shavuot. Rabbi Herzfeld later wrote:

We just wanted to share the message that we were all in tremendous pain and that our lives were not going on as normal. Even though the holiday is a joyous occasion, I felt tears in my eyes as I recited our sacred prayers.

In the evening, as soon as the festival ended, about a dozen congregants went to a local gay bar that evening to reach out. Outside the bar, they met and wept with an individual whose cousin had been killed in the shooting. When they went inside, Rabbi Herzfeld recalls,

We didn't know what to expect, but it turned out that we had so much in common. We met everyone in the bar. One of the patrons told me that his stepchildren were actually bar-mitzvahed in our congregation. Another one asked for my card so that his church could come and visit. The bartender shut off all of the music in the room, and the crowd became silent as we offered words of prayer and healing.

They sang together, and lit memorial candles. And one of the congregants bought a beer for everyone in the house.

Rabbi Herzfeld again:

I felt the reality that we are living in a time of enormous pain. But I also felt that the night was a tremendous learning experience for me. I learned that when a rabbi and members of an Orthodox synagogue walk into a gay African American bar, it is not the opening line of a joke but an opportunity to connect; it is an opportunity to break down barriers and come together as one; it is an opportunity to learn that if we are going to survive, we all need each other.

Rabbi Herzfeld and his congregants not only heard the news; they actively sought to learn more, to connect with others in grief and consolation. Here is the *lev shomeah*, the listening heart that moves beyond the self, that opens to others with compassion.

This story is so moving in part because it's unexpected. We are surprised to read and hear about people who move beyond their familiar circles, transcend what we assume to be their boundaries. And that's understandable: living in a world where there is so much that can be frightening, many of us are familiar with the desire to circle the wagons. And that brings me to

Number 3: Hope versus fear. Solomon is a model for *lev shomeah*, the heart that is open and responsive to others. On the other hand, says Rabbi Fiegelson, there is Pharaoh. His heart is *kaved*, heavy and closed. Looking out at the world, Pharaoh sees threat:

[Pharaoh] said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us *nit-chachma lo*, deal shrewdly with them, so they may not increase. Otherwise, in the event of war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us, and rise from the ground and gain ascendancy over us.” So he set taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. [Exodus 1:8-11]

While Solomon is known for *chochma*, wisdom, Pharaoh’s *lev kaved* leads to the perversion of wisdom – *nit-chochma* – shrewdness. Solomon enlists workers to build the Temple in Jerusalem; Pharaoh forces Israelite slaves to build garrison cities. As Rabbi Feigelson notes, Solomon “build[s] a home for God; Pharaoh’s heart leads him to use his power in a project of self-aggrandizement.”

We often look at Pharaoh as one of Torah’s great exemplars of evil, and yet perhaps we can understand him, at least a little: It is far harder to nurture an open heart, to recognize our connection with others, if we cultivate a dark and fearful view of the world.

While never sugar-coating the challenges and struggles of living, Judaism is not a religion where we are progressing toward an apocalypse. The King James Bible famously begins Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” But this asserts a start to time, a beginning moment. The theology of the translators assumes that if there is a beginning of days, then there must be an apocalyptic end of days.

In contrast, we translate *b’reishit barah Elohim* “When God began to create.” Not a beginning of time, but the start of the continual process of creation. And we are to work each day as partners with God to continue creating, fixing and bringing whatever goodness we can to our world.

On Rosh HaShanah there is a special verse added to the prayer Yotzer Or – Our gratitude for the first lights of creation and the daily renewal of the sun’s rising each day. As we look expectantly to the New Year we pray “*Or Olam b’otzar chayyim, orot me’ofel, amar vyehi.*” In the Treasury-of-life is light eternal; God spoke, and out of darkness came light. In this view, our world is not contracting toward darkness but expanding toward hidden light. This primordial light -- stored away at the time of creation -- is waiting for us in all of its profound creative potential, waiting to be revealed through our deeds of goodness and justice.

I am not saying this ultimately optimistic view is one I can easily hold to. I struggle, as many also do, when I look out and so much suffering, so many seemingly intractable problems in our country and in the world. I get fearful. But Sharon Salzberg has beautiful wisdom about faith, fear and our future. She teaches:

The power of faith doesn't mean we've annihilated fear, or denied it, or overcome it through strenuous effort. ... It means feeling our fear and still remaining in touch with our heart, so that fear does not define our entire world, all we can see or do or imagine.

So, in this New Year, I encourage you to stay brave, to nurture a listening heart, to find new ways of being connected in community, and building the world we hope for. May we be strengthened and renewed for a good and sweet New Year. Shana Tova!