My Strength and God's Song: Jewish Wisdom for Despairing Times

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5786

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Kehillah Synagogue

Begin with niggun of Ozi v'Zimrat Yah [I invite everyone to join me in this wordless melody.]

Shanah tovah. The year that has passed has been profoundly challenging and painful. So much in the world around us has weighed heavily on us as Americans, as Jews, as Jewish-Americans.

We've witnessed the erosion of democracy and growing authoritarianism at home, the threat of mass deportation of immigrants, the devastation caused by natural disasters in our own area as well as around the state and country. And of course there is the horrific toll of the Israel/Hamas war, the ongoing captivity of hostages, the decimation, death and starvation in Gaza – and in addition to the loss of life and the destruction, there are the ways that the war has divided families and communities here and around the world.

I have spoken to many who are wrestling with a pervasive sense of despair. As we enter a new year, searching for renewal, I want us to begin in this very real place of where many of us are.

What, then, is a Jewish response to despair? What wisdom and tools can Judaism offer us? How, in these distressing times, can our tradition help us find a sustaining hope?

The High Holiday period begins in the valley of despair, with the observance of Tisha b'Av, the ninth of Av. We fast and remember the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 586 BCE and many catastrophes that have befallen our people. At the heart of communal observance is the chanting *Eicha*, the Book of Lamentations. It is a brutal text. Four voices – the people, the city of Jerusalem itself, a soldier or *gever* who was unable to protect those around him, and a narrator, cry out from the horrors, suffering and devastation they have seen. They call out to God from their pain, seeking an explanation, for solace, for God to see

their suffering. They seek witness; but God is silent in the book. God does not appear. God does not respond.

Biblical scholar Kathleen O'Connor argues that the book's very spiritual power is born from this silence. The pain is raw, unmediated by easy assurances. It allows expressions of deep grief and despair to be the focus. She argues that the book itself becomes a witness. And that centuries later, when we read the book each year as part of our ritual, we -- each of us -- become the witnesses that those who suffered were seeking.

There is no easy comfort in Lamentations, but it teaches us something profound. Despair is compounded by isolation. Calling out to, and being heard by others brings us into relationship and connection. Despair seeks witness. Witness is something that we may both seek and provide throughout our lives.

The polarization in our Jewish community has, I believe, led many of us to turn away, not only from each other's grief, but from those who are suffering directly from the war but who are not on "our" side - whichever side that is. This is dangerous. When we shut each other down, argue, and refuse to listen, it fractures our community. And when digging in, in turn, leads us to turn our backs on those who are crying out, it lessens our humanity. We know that all are created in the Divine image; and so it is our obligation to listen to one another, to hear the cries of the suffering -- and it is also the first wisdom in how to respond to despair.

This coming Sunday, September 28th, at 10:30 am, we'll be holding a dialogue session on responding to the brokenness of the world. This dialogue aims to help us live our values and to counter the isolation of this moment. It will help us to speak about the pain and distress that we have seen, and to hear each other about the pain and distress that we are carrying right now. The time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -- which we name as the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*, of return -- are an especially powerful time to the sacred work of turning toward each other.

It is, of course, not easy to voice our pain and confusion. And it may stretch our empathy and emotional and spiritual endurance to hear the pain of others.

Here, I believe is where Jewish conceptions of refuge – not retreat, not denial, but refuge -- can be a profound gift.

I have carried something with me for many years now. Literally, carried, four pieces of paper – folded neatly in half in my pocketbook. The papers were given to me by Henry Landsberger, (z"l), a beloved member of our congregation. Born in Dresden, Germany in 1926, Henry was one of the nearly 10,000 children, mostly Jewish, evacuated from German-controlled lands to England -- the *Kindertransport* -- prior to the start of World War II. Henry's grandfather, Rabbi Dr. Jacob Winter, was the last chief rabbi of the Semper or Dresden synagogue, which was burned to the ground by the Nazis on *Kristallnacht* in 1938; Henry lived to speak at the dedication of its rebuilding in 2001.

Henry spoke to me often of his history and of his grandfather's legacy. One day, he gave me one of his grandfather's sermons printed on these four pieces of paper that I carry with me. The sermon had been saved and he had it translated into English. It is remarkable, and still when I read it I get chills. Rabbi Winter was addressing his congregation in 1933 or 1934 on the Festival of Shemini Atzeret, which comes after the conclusion of Sukkot and really ends the High Holy Day period. Rabbi Winter named the heavy uncertainty, worry and sorrow of his congregation. Still, he implored them to draw from the beauty and the blessing that the holiday had to offer, and so to be strengthened by it and renewed by its refuge. He wrote:

> *Barukh Ha-Shem asher natan menuha le-amo Yisrael.* "Praised be the Only One, who has given tranquility to Israel, [God'] people...." Solomon the Wise made this blessing once upon a time.... Can we today repeat that blessing after Solomon? Truly, tranquility is not given the people of Israel today. It has been placed into a situation of great uncertainty. It lives in worry and sadness…..
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> And yet, even though we cannot do it when we look at the external aspects of our lives, we can, and we should repeat after Solomon with the

deepest of emotions as our soul is raised up to the time of these holy days of awe.... 'Praised be the Only One, Who has given [God's] people tranquility.'"

Rabbi Winter goes on to compare the physical Temple that Solomon built with the spiritual refuge we build for ourselves during the High Holy Days. He describes building that spiritual refuge as we seek to mend our ways on Rosh Hashana, as we recognize our weaknesses and struggle for moral strength on Yom Kippur.

"It is our souls," he says, "which we have made into God's temples, into a holy place. We turned away, for a brief moment, from the worries that beset us, and tranquility entered our soul."

Rabbi Winter concludes, "....we may say with a sense of gratitude: praised be the only One Who, through [*mitzvot]*, has lifted us for a brief time out of the troubles of the world, and gave us the strength of spirit to follow such holy guidelines."

Here was a community faced with grave darkness. To lead his congregation, to strengthen them, Rabbi Winter urged them to draw from the well of the tradition – its beauty and sanctity – to find refuge in the cycles of sacred time that are always available to us.

Today, we are facing our own challenges and darkness. We may easily feel overwhelmed, feeding despair. But the refuge of sacred time, of communal song and prayer, of festivals and study and the deep wisdom of our texts and traditions is here for us, too. You can feel the calm descending after lighting Shabbat candles each week. You can feel the wholeness and connection of the morning and evening Shema and the music of our prayers in community. When we study together, share and debate ideas, we find connection to each other, and to our tradition. This, too, is a form of refuge and renewal.

At the same time, we know that refuge is not enough. If all we do is move between despair, and seeking refuge, and then despair again, nothing changes; the cycle is simply stasis.

The answer is also not simply to be more optimistic. Optimism is passive: It's the assumption that it will all, somehow, work out all right. Like pessimism, it makes us bystanders, and requires nothing of us.

In contrast, hope is grounded in action. If the essence of despair is, "There is nothing we can do," hope insists that we can take steps toward a better future. Hope does not guarantee an outcome; but it gives us direction and opens possibilities.

After crossing the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites sing a joyful song. It's the melody we sang together at the start of my remarks: *Ozi v'zimrat Yah vay'hi li lishuah.* My strength, and the song of God, will be redemption for me. Rabbi Debra Orenstein identifies two essential aspects of hope - agency and acceptance - and both are embodied in that short song.

"My strength." Here is agency. Every movement, no matter how small - every choice that we make, each time we take action guided by our values - sustains hope.

As I was drafting this sermon, I attended an online seminar led by my dear friend, Rabbi Amy Klein -- a lead organizer in the northern Galil of the movement in Israel that is fighting for release of the hostages, the end the starvation of Gaza, withdrawal IDF troops and implementing a regional peace agreement.

Rabbi Klein had helped to organize and participated in the largest coordinated protest in Israel since the war began. A half a million Israelis took to the streets - by population, this is the equivalent of *17 million* Americans joining together in protest on a single day. After laying out the many challenges and harsh realities of her work, Amy explained, "No one who is experienced really thought we would finish things in a day...but we pushed the hope forward, showed that the public... can be called to action, to rise and fight." She concluded her talk with remarks from a lead organizer of the protest: "It is easiest to be pessimistic or optimistic," he said, "Both are passive acts. What is hardest is to hold the **hope** – to see with eyes wide open all the horrors and the downward spiral, and to preserve the belief in the ability to change reality. That is what being part of the

[movement] is – being out on the streets with others who are doing the same, taking risks."

Doing strengthens our sense that we *can* do; this in turn moves us toward more action. Our actions, too, may inspire others to act.

Sometimes, though, we may feel too overwhelmed to act. This is where the second half of the verse - *zimrat Yah* - comes in.

When our own strength wanes, we can look to sources outside of ourselves, here named as "the song of God," for help. We know the experience of being lifted by song, by sacred study, by community, by prayer.

I want to invite everyone, for just one minute, to think of a time in your life when you have felt held, comforted, counseled or strengthened by others when you, yourself, could not see a path forward.

We might name such support as how God's saving presence and compassion can be felt through the caring deeds of others. In the Hallel prayers we sing, *Min ha metzar kara'ti yah …..anani va merchav yah*: I called out from the narrow places; from the world where I could see no options, no way forward. And *ananani ba merchav yah*: God, the Source of being and becoming, answered me with expansiveness -- sustaining me so that I could see potentialities beyond this moment and move toward new vistas, to new possibilities.

On one hand, these are profoundly difficult times. Many of us feel threatened on so many fronts at once that we do not know what to do or where to begin. On the other hand: The work that lies before us now is the same work that has *always* been ours to do. Our obligations to protect the most vulnerable, to feed the hungry, to protect the natural world, to work for peace, to build just societies wherever we are because every person is created *b'tzelem Elohim,* in the Divine image -- these have been our *mitzvot* for millennia.

Surely the obstacles are great, and the risks are real, but the fight is not new.

Sometime between 190 and 230 CE - nearly two thousand years ago - the sages of the Mishnah composed the collection of ethical teachings that we know as *Pirke Avot.* One of its most famous passages is a teaching of Rabbi Tarfon:

Lo alecha hamalacha ligmor, v'lo atah ven chorin libatel mimenah - "You are not required to complete the work, but you are not free to desist from it." In his modern translation and interpretation of this classic text, Rabbi Rami Shapiro writes,

You are not obligated to complete the work,

but neither are you free to abandon it.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

Do justly, now.

Love mercy, now.

Walk humbly, now.

In our community, we have people who have helped to set up computer systems for El Centro Hispano and helped with office work, and others who have provided free legal advice. Some have brought groceries and food to local refugee and immigrant families seeking to find safe haven here. Volunteers have shlepped ingredients to a local high school so cooking classes can make food for emergency shelters in sub-freezing weather. In the past, we have put pressure on our local Board of Elections to restore Sunday voting. With Justice United, we have made important inroads in local mental health services, criminal justice reform, and affordable housing. Congregants have participated in political protests near and far. As I mentioned a little while ago, right now I we are working with a multi-faith group to strengthen civic society and our democracy through the Faith 250 initiative. In the coming year, I am committed to continuing to build partnerships, and to seek opportunities for us to address these difficult times as a community.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z”l) said so eloquently, “To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair.... Judaism is a

sustained struggle... against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet. There is no more challenging vocation."

Every prayer service from the first of *Elul* to the end of Sukkot - Shemini Atzeret - concludes with the Psalm of the Season, Psalm 27. And the last verse implores each one of us (as translated by Rabbi Yael Levy), *Kavei el Adonai chazak v'ya'ametz libecha v'kavei el Adonai* -- "Cultivate hope in the Infinite Presence, let your heart be strong and filled with courage. Cultivate hope."

Every step, large or small, guided by our sacred values, can help us to create and sustain hope. In the coming year, may we draw on our own strengths, find solidarity with one another, draw inspiration from our sacred traditions, and know that we are held in the Divine Presence. May our hearts be strengthened with courage and hope, and may our deeds bring blessing, justice and compassion into our world.

And let us say: Amen.