

FROM THE RABBI

On Monday, March 9, 2020, following the funeral of a beloved long-time member, I went to VPR with my friends Rev. Ken White and Imam Islam Hassan to interview Jane Lindholm for our podcast, “Kipah, Kufi and Collar.” It was beyond fun to turn the tables to interview the interviewer extraordinaire. I had been interviewed by Jane a few times and was very fond of her. So it happened that what I remember most vividly of that day was the opening conversation at the coffee area as Jane shared her concerns that the Coronavirus was coming our way and we might have to work and do childcare from home. Who would take care of her two young children if their school and daycare was shut down? I felt her worry and blurted out, “I’ll help you, Jane!”

That was that, and onward the interview began. That night we celebrated Purim with the feeling of a coming storm. It was just a couple days later when the stay-at-home order began. With everything I would have to figure out here at Ohavi Zedek, I first said to my husband, “Oh no! I promised Jane Lindholm I’d help her with childcare. I can’t do that!” Fortunately, she didn’t come asking for childcare from this busy rabbi.

That day was when we were just starting to notice how our lives would be disrupted; a disruption that over these months has brought about so much change we are only just beginning to take note of where we were and what has happened in our lives. Not knowing how long it would last added to our anxiety.

Recently, I have been enjoying a book by my colleague Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, *Life’s Daily Blessings; Inspiring Reflections on Gratitude and Joy for Every Day, Based on Jewish Wisdom*. Instinctively, I turned to the page for March 12, recalling the fateful day when we cancelled our in-person synagogue events. The chosen text for that day was from Ecclesiastes/Kohelet 1:8:

“Everything is exhausting. You can’t speak. The eye can’t see enough. The ear can’t hear enough.”

Rabbi Olitzky ponders,

“We may try to understand the world around us, and we may never be satisfied by what we learn. Nevertheless because of the divine spark that rests inside each of us, we are motivated to go on living, to work hard to build a better world, to express our creative self. Being alive is blessing enough to motivate us.”

What an apt description of what we have been through in the past months since March 12, 2020. With creativity and enormous hard work, we have animated that divine spark within us as individuals and as a community, motivated to build a better world. This, of course, begins with the world of our community, embracing change to build back better.

Looking for a bookend to March 12, I turned to the page for May 27 – this year, on the eve of Memorial Day weekend, for the inspiration from that day's *kavanah*/spiritual intention. Rabbi Olitzky quotes Rabbi Melanie Aron, with this teaching:

"In Judaism, holiness is not the same as perfection. The Israelites wandering in the desert are called holy, am kadosh, goy kadosh, not because of their actions, but because of their aspirations. Each of us is commanded to be holy, not because we can be perfect, but because we can perform holy acts and increase holiness in the world."

This is our purpose. It is the kind of message we need to carry around with us, to post on the refrigerator door, or the doorposts of our homes. Rabbi Olitzky explains, *"We can become holy because of where we want to be...We bring holiness into the world by what we attempt to do and thereby become holy as a result of being engaged in the process..."* This is our becoming.

Like our ancestors in the time of Miriam and Moses, we have been in a wilderness, and the wilderness changes us. The question for us then, is what is the nature of our becoming now?

We recently read Parashat Shelach Lecha/the Torah portion of Moses sending messengers into the promised land to scout it out. How would it work for the Israelites who had been freed from slavery to enter what for them would be a new and strange reality? Twelve scouts, one from each tribe came back with their reactions. Two of them, Joshua and Caleb, told of the land flowing with milk and honey – they imagined the new reality as one of abundance.

But the ten other scouts panicked. Sure, there was milk and honey, but also giants in large and fortified cities. They felt like grasshoppers to the giants. No, they said, we can't go. And so it was decided that the people were not ready for change. They would need to remain in the wilderness for a generation, so the next generation would venture forth. For them, change was too frightening, too overwhelming, and just not possible.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who passed away this year, wrote about this moment as *"all-or-nothing" thinking*. Everything is either black or white, good or bad, easy or impossible....It couldn't be done. There was no room for shading, nuance, complexity. They could have said, "It will be difficult, we will need courage and skill, but with God's help we will prevail." But they did not. Their thinking was a polarized either/or."

The lesson from this is clear: *"Never let negative emotions distort your perceptions. To see the world as it is, not as you are afraid it might be, let faith banish fear."*

We have lived with too much fear in this past year and a half. Yes, fear of disease and suffering that was warranted and very real. But the fear of change that gripped our society and so much of our hearts grew out of a time of dramatic change in our world, in our culture, in our lives and in our community.

The best lesson to derive from this time is to overcome the fear of change with an embrace of what is possible – with nuance and shades of color. We are in the midst of great change in our community, and this change does not erase the past. Rather, it honors our past as we build upon it, balancing modernity with tradition. This season’s new beginning is filled with the potential to embody holiness through our aspirations.

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May our time of change not ignite fear, as it did for the scouts in the time of our ancestors. If you are only looking for what you want, you will miss out on the world of possibilities before us. Let us avoid the expectation of perfection – that it should be as each of us wishes for it to be – but rather, a shared sense of joy in anticipation of a new beginning together that honors our past and befits this new time of abundant possibility.

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