

## Sermon for Rosh HaShanah – 2021 - The Butterfly Effect

The Jewish people have a long history of surviving chaotic times. Despite odds often stacked against us, we have withstood the destruction of empires, isolation, assimilation, and attempted genocide. How did our people do that? How did we recreate and rebuild again and again? How can we use those lessons in our own chaotic times?

Well, let's start with the birth of our people as a nation – the Revelation at Sinai. If you read Exodus 19, you would think that Revelation was a well-orchestrated meeting between God and the Jewish people. God, in a very Book of Exodus kind of way, is trying to manipulate the pieces into place, giving very careful instructions to Moses. But despite attempts by God and Moses to make it otherwise, it was, as they say on Netflix, *Fauda*, a *balagan* in Israel; here, it was just a big mess. Of course it was – Think of the two parties trying to meet. On the one side, you have the Jewish people, bedraggled, less than two months after the escape from hundreds of years of slavery. Since fleeing Egypt, we crossed a sea in miraculous fashion, fought battles and defeated militarily superior enemies, learned to live off manna, loosely organized a society around a system of judges, all while traveling more or less non-stop through a wilderness. Now, all of a sudden, we camp around this mountain and are told we are about to have an audience with God, the source of our salvation. Who can blame us for being a little *fertumult*?

And then you have God – God can't resist putting on a big show, but it's the last thing these frightened people need to see! So, Moshe goes up on the mountain and all you-know-what breaks loose. The mountain turns into a volcano, the earth shakes, the mountain top explodes in fire, a wail like the sound of a shofar can be heard like a storm warning siren growing louder and louder, and a fiery cloud descends on the mountain. The people were like, "No, thank you." They begged Moshe to represent them in the face of the uproar. And so he did. But how did Moshe face this chaotic and daunting situation? In midrash Tanhuma (32:1), we are taught that Moshe **ascended into** the fiery cloud of the presence of God. How did he ascend? Like a lion, ferociously standing up to the chaos? No. Like an elephant too massive to be moved by the storm? Not that either. Like an eagle craftily navigating the winds with its massive wingspan? Quite the opposite. The midrash tells us that Moshe entered the torrent like a butterfly.

A butterfly? Like a butterfly? What good would a butterfly be in all of that? When we can answer that question, we can answer how to manage and even prosper in our own moment of chaos.

One theory would have it that the butterfly is, in fact, the master of chaos. In chaos theory, the Butterfly Effect refers to the idea that a small change in one location can have rippling, unknown effects in another. The purveyors of this idea

summarize the concept by blaming the butterfly. As the theory goes, “somewhere in China a butterfly flaps its wings and later there is a tornado in Texas.” And you know, the last year and a half feels a little like that – like something that may not have originally seemed so consequential happened halfway around the world and now we are suffering due to it. But isn’t it bizarre to blame the flap of a butterfly’s wings for all that? Perhaps it is just easier to blame the defenseless butterfly than to admit our own failures or recognize the limits of our knowledge and power. No, we will not find answers in modern chaos theory, but in ancient chaos wisdom.

The butterfly is, in fact, a most miraculous creature. Everyone learns about butterflies when they are young - they are a remarkably beautiful part of the insect world and, of course, because of their astonishing life-cycle metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly. But the truth is that metamorphosis is only the second most wondrous thing about butterflies, and you’ve probably never even heard of the first. Let’s remedy that right now...it’s in how they migrate.

Monarch butterflies, those pretty orange and black ones you may have seen fluttering around here over the last few weeks, spend the winter on a group of enormous trees in Central Mexico. Millions and millions of them cling to the sides of these giant trees for months on end. And then, one spring day when the air gets warm enough a silent signal spreads throughout the grove and all at once in a cascade of orange, black and white, millions of butterflies release from their trees and head north pollinating flowers and trees and spreading smiles with their beauty wherever they go (look it up on YouTube - it’s stunning!). In about one week, the butterflies reach Texas. There they grow tired, lay an egg on the underside of a milkweed leaf, and die. Soon, that egg hatches and a caterpillar emerges. The caterpillar eats, and eats and eats, as Eric Carle, who we sadly lost this year, taught us. And then, it creates a chrysalis and emerges a little over a week later as a butterfly. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation.

This 2<sup>nd</sup> generation butterfly continues the migration. Unlike its parent, which lived nine months, this generation will live only 7-10 days. During that time, the butterfly will fly North and reach Virginia or Minnesota or maybe your garden here on the Sound Shore if you plant milkweed (and I really think you should.) She too will land on a leaf and lay an egg and go to her rest.

The cycle continues with a third generation - egg, caterpillar, butterfly, flight North to somewhere in Canada - egg laid, death. When that last egg hatches and the 4<sup>th</sup> generation emerges 1000s of miles from its ancestral home. This great-grandchild of that first butterfly who left her home in Mexico is not like her mother or grandmother. She is a super butterfly. She will launch herself into the Canadian atmosphere and fly the extraordinary distance back to Mexico all by herself and live another 9 months, to spend winter on a tree and start the

annual cycle again. The whole migration of thousands of miles and back takes just one summer but four generations.

But here's what's really going to cook your noodle – our friend the super-butterfly, generation 4 since her great-grandmother left Mexico, she flies back to the same grove of trees her great-grandmother left – often to the very same tree! Think about that for a second – I need a GPS to get from the synagogue back to my house two blocks away, but monarch butterflies, those fragile, beautiful little creatures with hardly a brain in their tiny heads, are part of a multi-generational migration of thousands of miles and they somehow pass down fundamental, intergenerational knowledge: this is where our home is, this is who we are, we are from this location, we belong in this place, we belong to each other, this is our purpose. Generations who never had the privilege to meet because, remember, the parents die before their eggs hatch, somehow still continue each other's journeys and return to the place they started. How crazy is that? This is one of those wondrous phenomena that makes me say – you're looking for God in the world? Follow the butterflies. These butterflies are God's insects; no wonder we call them Monarchs.

And so too for God's people – the butterfly is the spirit animal of the Jewish people, from the moment Moshe imitated one when he entered the tempest of God's Presence until today – if history is a violent, chaotic storm, and let's face it, this is not the first pandemic we have faced, or the first wave of Antisemitism, as a matter of fact the two have often been closely linked, or the first natural disaster either – So if history is a tempest, then the butterfly's strategy of leaping into the wind and riding the air flows rather than resisting them has always been the Jewish way. We don't use the violent nature of history as an excuse to step outside it – our mission as a people is to be an *Ohr L'Goyim*, a light *among* the nations, and to do *tikkun olam*, to take a broken history and a broken creation and bring repair, healing and the sacred by spreading morality, kindness and serving life – pollinating the world, so to speak, with holiness.

We, the Jewish people, are butterfly people – continuing a journey started by our ancestors, knowing that we won't complete it any more than Abraham and Sarah did, but trying to pass the baton to our progeny who will continue the journey. As Pirkei Avot says, "it is not our responsibility to finish the task, nor are we free to desist from it." We are fragile, yet resilient; beautiful, yet surprisingly tough; striving to create and educate the next super generation to have that greater impact on the world and our people. The Jewish people are no less a miracle than the remarkable butterfly.

So what are the lessons for us butterfly people in these challenging times? Launch ourselves into the winds and be a force for good, for joy, for beauty, for holiness in the world wherever we may be blown by the chaos. And perhaps the most important thing we can learn from the monarch butterfly is that wherever the air currents of history take us in the world, in whatever time we live, the most

crucial piece of knowledge is where our real home is. For the butterflies, it's a tree in a special forest in Mexico; what makes up home for you? Are the beautiful traditions and rituals of our people part of it? Lighting candles on Shabbat? Doing whatever it takes to be with family on Passover – even trying to figure out how to use the mute button on Zoom, or maybe home is coming right here to WJC every day, every Shabbat, or every fall?

Does home include being part of a community with a sacred purpose? Volunteering here with the remarkable Bikkur Holim committee, to whom we are so grateful for taking care of our families, especially during these difficult months of the pandemic, or with our Social Justice and Action Committee, SOJAC, or taking part in one of their collections so needed by so many over the last year and a half. Is it volunteering with other organizations like the Boys and Girls Club or Westchester Jewish Coalition for Immigration, living our Jewish values in community, and sharing them with others? Or maybe it is getting involved in the world around you, in whatever way you feel meets those ideals.

Maybe home is your connection to the nation we call our homeland. Being blown here and there throughout history, Israel has ever been a point of hope and orientation for us, and that continues to be the case today. Perhaps you orient yourself by extending your commitment to our homeland and where you see that it could be better, helping to make it so with unconditional love, reliable support, and the connection of millennia.

All of these, tradition and ritual, connection to sacred community, and orientation towards Israel, are ways the Jewish people have maintained our course amid the chaos of 3000 years of riding the currents of history. If the current chaos has disconnected you from those things, perhaps finding stability is in reconnecting with any one of those Jewish “homes” that once brought you comfort. Chances are, it will do so again.

But today I want to emphasize one more in particular - this place. We want you to know you always have a home here - WJC remains a stable force for goodness and holiness amid the winds of chaos. If it's been awhile since you've been here physically, it can be harder to feel connected. I know some of you have felt the WJC presence through our online offerings and we are thrilled that it's been a source of connection for you.

But we also know that for other members of our WJC family this time of physical separation has been overwhelming. Maybe you've felt lost - like a butterfly caught in a storm that needs a few minutes to reorient itself. We've been through a storm, maybe we still feel like we are in it. Well, one of the magical things about home is that even when you've been away for awhile, it's still your home - it is still the true North by which we find our way, just like the trees are for the butterflies. If you need help finding your way home to WJC right now, please reach out to me and let's see what we can do about that. On this Day of Teshuva

– Day of Return – it is time to find our way home, to get back to the fundamentals, so we can get back to having the positive impact in the world that is our very purpose.

So let's close with a prayer: Ribono shel Olam, We recognize how crucial is orientation to home. Without those trees in Mexico, there would be no monarch butterflies – they are nothing without their true home, and neither are we. In order to find our direction in the storm, we need that grounding, that orientation, of our tradition, of our spiritual home right here at WJC, and of our Homeland.

The year and a half behind us has been like nothing we've ever experienced, and the days in front of us still feel uncertain. So, how do we find our footing in this mess? What can we look towards as we start this new year? Help us acquire the butterfly. Help us realize that the butterfly doesn't create chaos. It withstands chaos. It navigates chaos, and it does so by focusing on its intergenerational mission and its home. May we do our part to fulfill our destinies as the butterflies among people, may we find our way in the tempest, spreading life and hope in its chaotic winds, may we do our part to ensure that we, and our children and our children's children, always know our way home. And let us say, amen.