

Rosh Hashanah 5781

Torah From The Ruins

Almost exactly six months ago from today, Louisiana went into its first lockdown against the coronavirus. Ever since, our lives have been changed, and are still changing, in ways we could not have imagined. And this year we are celebrating a unique Rosh Hashanah in an unprecedented way.

In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit investigates a number of modern disasters, including the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, the Halifax Explosion of 1917, 9/11 and of course Hurricane Katrina. She argues that while disaster is always devastating, painful and cruel, it also has a way of creating a sense of opportunity, solidarity and dedication, even a sense of belonging, that might previously have been absent. She points out that the word *emergency* is related to the word *emerge*, as if to remind us that our separation from what is familiar also demands that we rise to the occasion.

And of course, this year is not the first time that our tradition has engaged with emergency. At Tisha B'Av this year I was forcefully reminded of what it must have been like for the rabbis of that period, who left the Jerusalem they loved and the institutions they had built in ruins as they themselves were exiled to unknown destinations. This pandemic has struck at some of the most fundamental institutions of our Jewish life - gathering in synagogues, Hebrew school, summer camps, our youth piled into cross-country buses, assisted living facilities and all our communal marking of lifecycle events, whether in joy or in sorrow. And we may very well feel that, like the rabbis, we are walking away from the ruins of life-as-it-was with no clear sense of life-as-it-could-be. And as one of you said to me just this week: "It grinds you down."

But we are carrying something very precious with us.

Whenever I teach an Introduction to Judaism class, I ask students to draw a picture of a tree. On to that tree we plot the way that Judaism was created and evolved itself, how by way of a series of commentaries and interpretations and passionate arguments it reinvented itself from being a nation in a land with a central cultic location and a system of sacrifices to the vibrant, varied, worldwide culture it is today.

The source starting point of that process, the roots of the tree, is a text: the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. And within that text, Torah is pre-eminent. Throughout our

history, we have dealt with disaster by reinterpreting Torah to meet our circumstances. By our doing so, the tree has adapted, and grown, and even flourished. Now we must turn to it once again. What wisdom can the five books of Torah offer us as we begin this new, unprecedented year?

Bereishit, the first book of Torah, starts with chaos. The world is *tohu va-vohu* - ‘welter and waste’. Chaos is limitless and it is intimidating. But without it there can be no true beginnings.

Early on in the pandemic I had the privilege of listening to Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson and Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg share their ideas about what our new situation made possible. Rabbi Artson drew the analogy of a chrysalis - that a caterpillar does not turn into a butterfly, as we might have been taught, but rather liquefies completely inside the cocoon, reducing itself to its basic elements from which a butterfly, in due course, will evolve anew. Our current situation is the same. We will not go ‘back to normal’ in our Jewish lives any more than a butterfly can revert to being a caterpillar. Instead, we must change. The book of Bereishit is longer, and covers more distance in time and space, than any other book in the Torah - a testament to the lengths that we must now go in applying all our ingenuity to creating new and different Jewish spaces, new and different Jewish gatherings, new and different Jewish rituals. While technology has proved a wonderful tool, it can’t replace creativity. Our own programming for this High Holyday season is itself *bereishit* - at the beginning - of this process.

Shemot, the second book of Torah, walks us out of the narrow space of Egypt and into the breadth in which journeys begin. That walk takes place through the narrowest of passages in the heart of the sea. Not once or even twice but *five* times the Torah tells us that the Children of Israel passed through the waters on dry land, drawing our attention over and over again to that pathway. We have to imagine how carefully the people needed to place their feet, following each other step by careful step, until they reached the shore on the other side.

Maintaining and nurturing our identity as a Conservative community during the pandemic has felt something like that walk. To one side of us has been the giant wave of the virus; to the other, the strong pull to declare everything a state of emergency such that halakhah is no longer applies to our lives.

Every Conservative community in this country and every Masorti community in the world has been engaged in a conversation about how much to let go and how much to double down on who we are and what we stand for. There is a pathway to be walked, and step by step we are evolving the Conservative movement, carefully maintaining its balance between tradition and change. As the only Conservative synagogue in this state, we have a responsibility to continue to do so.

Vayikra, the third book of the Torah, takes us into a different landscape - one that makes demands on us. The narrative of the journey pauses, to be replaced by structures and rules. Vayikra is a hard read for this reason. Yet its very first word is a sign for these times. *Vayikra* - means, "*The Holy One called.*" - to Moses. If we look closely at the word as it's written in the Torah, we see that the final letter, the *aleph*, is smaller than the rest of the word - *zei'ra*, tiny.

This year we can understand this symbolism as a paradigm shift in what we mean by Judaism.

For at least a generation we have had the resources to outsource our Judaism - to organizations, to camps and retreats - and yes, even to synagogues. It's been a paradox that in this age where the individual is everything, this most personal aspect of ourselves has often been held by the collective. But now, when familiar community spaces are temporarily unavailable, we have each had to shrink our horizons and rediscover or uncover our personal Jewish practice and take ownership of it. A couple of years ago I stood here and talked about Judaism as the treasure under the stove in our own kitchens. There seems to have been some enthusiastic digging!

People who never made challah before the pandemic are now progressing to complex braiding patterns. People who never had mezuzot on their homes are making and hanging them. Shabbat candles have been shining in spaces they never shone before. We have been listening to Jewish podcasts, compiling Jewish playlists, reading and discussing Jewish books, watching Jewish films and videos. Limmud, the national and international learning conference, has been mobbed.

And because of this exploration, we are developing a new set of Jewish muscles, a renewed sense of Jewish curiosity and Jewish pride and a stronger Jewish scaffolding for understanding our life and our experience and our relationships.

My hope is that the tiny *alef* of the personal stays with us when we are able to gather again. Each of us will have new treasures to offer each other and the community.

Bamidbar, the fourth book of the Torah, is the book in which the Israelites really become an *edah* - a community. There are fewer miracles, the Holy One feels less present, somehow, as the focus shifts on to how this group of individuals is going to form itself into a brand new collective.

And we are faced with exactly the same kind of challenge, and it feels as though it is a challenge that is unique in the history of Judaism, because in the past we have always had the option to gather. But now we need to understand the term, “together” differently.

Beyond the obvious new ways of gathering physically - in drive bys, on the levee, in small groups masked on front yards - we are discovering a whole new set of connections to each other. Community doesn't mean “getting together” any more so much as “caring together.” We've seen this in the way that organizations are collaborating so much more, thinking generously about what resources can be pooled into a kind of commons which enriches everyone who participates. And as individuals we are re-examining our sense of self. Just one example of this: why do we mask? Not so much for ourselves, but in order to protect each other. As soon as I encounter another person, my mask goes on: I wear it not for me but for you, because in this environment of unquantifiable risks, we have to be able to trust each other. In Jewish terms, we are being asked to take one more step away from the *yetzer ha-ra*, the drive to rely on and enrich ourselves, towards the *yetzer ha-tov*, the drive to enrich and protect each other.

Reverend Alex Zuber is a Lutheran pastor in Virginia. He officiated a funeral for a member of his community; some of the family of the deceased who attended already knew they had COVID but did not disclose this to him. Rev Zuber became infected - fortunately, he is recovering. He wrote afterwards: “If we want to survive this, if we want to see an end to this pandemic, we must choose selflessness, we must discard selfishness, and we must recognize how inextricably bound we are to one another.”

And so we come to **Devarim**, the fifth book of the Torah. It’s a book that looks back over the Torah and charges the people for the future. How can we charge ourselves, this first day of the new year of 5781?

Let’s remind ourselves:

Bereishit - we are the ones who begin. We invent, we innovate, we set aside what is not useful and craft new meaning from what remains.

Shemot - we navigate the narrow places and find balance

Vayikra - we remember we are individuals

Bamidbar - we reconstitute community

And what about **Devarim**? The Hebrew means both ‘word’ and ‘thing.’ We go back to the words, to the things that matter. And according to Moses, they are not prose, and not poetry, but a song: a form that has the capacity to reach beyond ordinary categories of meaning while still inspiring us in ways we can’t exactly describe. Today, somehow or other, every Jewish community in the world is singing.

Rebecca Solnit writes:

We don’t have a language for this emotion in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear.

And we don’t. But we do have the Torah. And the Torah is a song.

So this year, let us hold on to it tightly and carry it with us on this new journey.

Resources:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/301070/a-paradise-built-in-hell-by-rebecca-solnit/>

<https://izzso.com/pastor-contracts-covid-from-funeral-of-deceased-patients/>