

SERMON

EVERYBODY FEELS THE WIND BLOW: KAVANAUGH AND SUKKOT

Temple Sinai, Rabbi David Edleson, Sept 28, 2018

I had planned a completely different service for tonight, one focused on Sukkot, with a short Torah Reading, but after yesterday's hearings at the Supreme Court, it just felt flat, and like it was avoiding the issue we are all reflecting on, and so while as a man, I am not the ideal spokesperson tonight, I feel I need to address it in some way, and so here goes.

First, let me give you the dry answer of Jewish tradition to what happened yesterday. Our tradition is profoundly concerned about fairness in the court system, *both to those who are vulnerable, but also to those in power*. As we read on Yom Kippur afternoon in Leviticus 19:

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.

So being powerful does not mean a person is not telling the truth, and being vulnerable or poor does not mean a person is telling the truth. The Torah here understands our implicit biases, and our tendency to side with those we feel share our experiences and vulnerabilities. No one is automatically believed.

But it doesn't end there. Our tradition showed great detailed concern about how to make a trial fair. For example, there is this very relevant passage from Torah, one we studied just a few weeks ago:

Deut 19: 15-19 A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days, and the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Our tradition from the *earliest times* had a very strong focus on a fair court system, on not lying as a witness, and on the need to do a **thorough inquiry or**

investigation (*v'darshu hashoftim heitev*) when there is concern about a malicious witness or a situation where the facts are disputed.

The Talmud only makes this ever more clear, with very strict and detailed rules about how to treat witnesses fairly, making sure not to stand for one but not the other, and putting guidelines on whose testimony is likely biased and which testimony is admissible. There is a full tractate plus much more in the Talmud focused entirely on a fair hearing and a thorough investigation, and the rights of witnesses and the rights of the accused. We should be proud, very proud, of what Judaism has contributed to the idea of “rule of law.”

But that isn’t a very satisfying answer after yesterday, and the other “Me, too” moments that have been shared since the Trump/Cosby/Weinstein unholy trinity of sexism emerged like a supernatural manifestation of our society’s inner demons, both of sexism and of the obscene amounts of power and money being held by a very few.

Indeed, I woke up this morning thinking about another Biblical passage, and the delicious desire for vengeance: In Genesis 34, we read:

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force.

As the story continues, the man who assaulted Dinah says he is madly in love with her and wants to marry her, but Dinah’s brothers, in a story I find particularly satisfying, aren’t buying it, and come up with a plan. They fool the local chieftain, the perpetrator, that he can marry their sister if all of the townsmen get circumcised. They agree and do it. Then we read this delicious verse:

On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob’s sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males.

While I know no one here would (sarcastic tone) ever want revenge like that because we are all rational, liberal adults, I suspect that most of us like to imagine such revenge because it reflects our own raw, angry, and frustrated emotions. Of course, who the revenge fantasy is aimed at depends a great deal on our political leanings, our personal experiences, and the people we make friends with.

While I know that the Talmud is who I would like to be, I think Dinah’s brothers, Shimon and Levi are also who I would like to be, and perhaps one of the reasons I

feel so exhausted and brain-tired today is that we all sit today somewhat uncomfortably in the stretch and pull between those two desires.

And after Dr. Ford's measured, intelligent and forthright answers and demeanor at the hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Mr. Kavanaugh's hissy-fit of self-righteous indignation at his privilege being questioned, his dismissive and obnoxious responses to women senators, and then Lindsay Graham's impassioned audition to become the next Attorney General, all after they kept Obama from appointing a judge for almost a year, was as terrifying as it was absurd. Living in Kafkaland is exhausting and demoralizing, and I found myself getting in a very dark mood.

It is very hard to pretend to be all festive for Sukkot when one is in such a mood. And yet, there is something about the sukkah that I think actually speaks to the spiritual pain this situation is causing and so since I am a rabbi, not Rachel Maddow, my mind keeps coming back to the image of the sukkah, as if there is something in the very sukkah itself that might speak to us, the way I guess a poet gets an image in their mind and it isn't clear exactly why or what it means, but it clearly is calling to me today.

We all know that the sukkah is a symbol of the fragility and vulnerability of our human lives and structures. We believe, in our houses, we are safe and invincible, but Sukkot reminds us that secure homes can all too quickly become half-made huts that don't keep out the wind or the rain or the cold.

- I think of the 5 million Syrian refugees that have gone from living in homes to living in huts, or tents – if they were lucky enough to be alive.
- I think of the Gazans who also have lost their homes, because of a Palestinian leadership who power depends on perpetuating a losing battle of attrition with Israel, and who place their own power and desire for admiration by their base above the wellbeing and lives of their people.
- I think, of course, of those Jews, wandering Europe after the concentration camps were liberated, or the Jews that were made refugees in 1948 when the Arab nations expelled them by law or by terror.
- And I think of all those in North Carolina, or in Indonesia, or Puerto Rico who have lost homes to flooding.

There is something about losing our home, the place we feel safest, that reminds us of how vulnerable we actually are, how exposed, and how fine the line of fate that determines if we live in a big house, or a makeshift Sukkah.

The Book of Ecclesiastes that is traditionally read at Sukkot, tells us that no matter how hard we work, or how much money we make, or how great our reputation, it can all quickly come to nothing and there is no fairness of justice in it. Being human means being vulnerable. There is a time to be born and time to die.

But there is something more in this image of the sukkah in my mind. Let me describe this image. It is of a sukkah with curtains for walls, curtains that are tattered and blow open and closed in the winds, where the schach, the thatch is half blown off. There is something in this tattered hut of a Sukkah that seems to reflect how I, and I think many of us, are feeling these days.

I think that for so many women, and also for many men, the process of opening up about their experiences of assault and harassment can be healing, but it also leaves us feeling exposed, naked to the elements, and vulnerable to attack. Watching Dr. Ford's courageous testimony yesterday, it was clear that her experiences had turned the warm safe home of her heart into a Sukkah that was torn and exposed and fragile.

I think many women here probably have that feeling. Being out and visible also means being exposed and vulnerable, whether we are talking about women's experiences, gay, trans, or people of color.

As I thought about this Sukkah, a line from a song kept coming to me. After about the fifth time it played through my head, I remembered where it was from. It is from one of my all-time favorite albums, Paul Simon's "Graceland." It goes:

*She said losing love is like a window in your heart
Everybody sees your blown apart
Everybody see the wind blow.*

So the song is about love, and I do believe that losing love, having a relationship implode or explode leaves us feeling exposed and vulnerable, more visible than we want to be. It makes of our hearts a Sukkah that doesn't seem strong enough to protect us.

But it is not only losing love that does this, but losing our confidence in the institutions we thought we could depend on, the institutions that we believed created a safe house of government around us – losing these, or losing our belief that these are a given and stable in our lives, this also leaves us feeling unsafe and exposed. It makes of our domed granite Capitol building a Sukkah where we can see that things have blown apart, where we can see the wind blow.

I think this image of this Sukkah of our disillusionment and despair, where we stand exposed and vulnerable and tattered, is perhaps the right image for this Sukkot. Next year, I hope to do a sermon about how much we have done together and how great it is to celebrate harvest, but I am not feeling great about the national harvest right now. It looked when Obama was in office, but now that I look closer, it all seems rotting and riddled with worms.

One of the purposes of the Sukkah is to remind us how vulnerable and fragile we always are. Sukkot reminds us that there are few homes more solid than the homes we had in Egypt, the homes of slaves, but that the journey from enslavement to freedom is one of exposure and vulnerability. We so often live in a delusion of safety. Many will cry they want to go right back to the safety of those times, and the comfort of those walls. At least we knew what to expect. And don't we see this all around us in the blowback from civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights. Isn't this at the heart of the election of this administration?

When we feel vulnerable, we tend to see ourselves standing alone, in the beat up Sukkah of our hearts, but today, let's remember that we stand together in this Sukkah, each feeling exposed, but together, we can create safety and beauty even in the tatters of what we thought was a great tabernacle.

Ecclesiastes teaches us that :

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

To quote a bumper sticker, "we are stronger together."

But Sukkot reminds us that safety can't come from walls, and money, and reputation – a real abiding sense of strength and safety comes not from might, or money, or power, but from spirit and the eternal flame of the holy and good that burns in each of us. As humans created in the image of God we know that there is something sacred and eternal, something larger than our individual selves – and whatever names we call it by, we know there is another kind of security, another kind of safety – one that doesn't come from the outside, but one that comes from

deep within, one that comes from the source of life and that no one can ever take from us. It is that flame that must be especially nurtured in times of danger, not as an escape from the work and struggle ahead, but as the ground upon which we can struggle, and build again.

There are few writings of ancient literature more honest, emotional and raw than the Psalms, and while Psalm 23 is always thought of as a reading for funerals, it is actually about how we, as the living, get through dark times.

The ETERNAL is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*2 God makes me lie down in green pastures;
and leads me beside still waters;
3 God restores my soul. And leads me in right paths
to honor God's name.*

*4 Yea though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff— they comfort me.*

*5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*6 Yes! goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the ETERNAL
all the days of my life.*

We may feel that our heart is a tattered Sukkah, open to the elements, where everyone can see we're blown apart, but Sukkah is also to remind us that we already live in a fine house – one made of love, and spirit, and things that are unchanging even when the wind howls, and the rains flood, and what we thought we could depend on seems ripped to shreds. Look not outwardly to God, but look inward to the flame of spirit, to the wellspring of love, and to the arms of God that surround and hold us, that pick us up and help us find the strength to make of this tattered human Sukkah, a great Temple of justice.

Ken Yehi Ratzon