

Rosh Hashanah 5771

Good evening and Shana Tovah.

Have you made your new year's resolutions yet? Perhaps you have and didn't realize you were doing so. For the past few weeks - the entire month of Elul, we are instructed to prepare ourselves for the Days of Awe by making teshuvah with those we have wronged. A significant element of teshuvah is the internal and external promise to change. I can't think of better New Year's resolutions than to promise to change that which causes pain or friction with the people in your life.

Earlier in the summer we had three very distressing weeks. These were marked with the three haftarot of admonition. If you scroll your mind back, you may recall we are told that both the Northern Kingdom and Jerusalem will fall as a direct result of our falling out of God's favor. In the haftarot, our faults are enumerated in some pretty graphic language; זָרַע מְרָעִים zera m'rei'im, brood of evildoers; אֵיכָה הִיְתָה לְזוֹנָה eichah, ha-y'tah l'zonah, Alas, she (Israel) has become a harlot; קְצִינֵי סְדֹם עַם עֲמֹרָה k'tzinei s'dom...am amorah, You chieftans of Sodom...You people of Gomorrah! This culminates on Tisha B'Av. A full fast where we read, and feel, Lamentations.

Then we are granted consolations. Or so we are told. The seven weeks between Tisha B'Av and today have been marked by seven haftarot of consolation. Every year, when I read these, I am struck by how *not* consoling they are, at least individually. The first starts נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ אִמִּי נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ nachamu nachamu ammi, "Comfort, oh Comfort my People." But it goes on to describe why we deserved the just punishments we received from God. Over the next several weeks we have a thematic return to our troubles, our responsibilities and God's abilities to redeem the nation from its plight.

As I mentioned earlier, these don't sound like consolation. In the first haftarah of consolation, we are told of our responsibilities; our hand in our own destruction. In the last, the text speaks of an age yet to come, for it

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says “Never again will Jerusalem be forsaken. . . never again will other nations take our grain.” It is a promise of the Messianic age.

What then are we to make of these individual haftarot that brought us to the doorstep of the New Year?

Perhaps the answer is in the totality of the cycle of admonition and consolation. If you look at the entire ten week cycle you begin to see a pattern. Each admonition builds on the prior, until we are told that God loathes our feeble attempts at keeping the letter of the law, while not following the truth. Similarly, with the consolations, we first are reminded of our culpability, then week over week, the picture gets rosier and rosier until we arrive at the Messianic age. Each consolation leads us gently and gradually from our lowest of lows to our ultimate high; shalom, peace, completeness.

What is also significant is that we do this as a people, not as individuals.

Every year we repeat this cycle. What I have just laid out was once considered a prima facie fact. Something that is true at first glance. But somehow we miss it – how is that?

Perhaps it is because we have stopped looking at the cycle, or shifted our focus to a different cycle.

In 2010, in America, most Jew’s relationship with Judaism is tied to their families’ lifecycle events. Someone dies, the Synagogue is involved. A wedding? Mazel Tov, call the rabbi. A boy is born, where is the moyel? Oy, you need to go to Hebrew School, it’s almost time for your bar mitzvah! And for many, there is a great silence between the bar or bat mitzvah and the next significant lifecycle event.

This is not how it was envisioned. This is not how Jews sustained themselves for two millennia in galut.

Instead, it was the *calendar* cycle that described a Jew’s relationship to Judaism. And not just the big poles of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Pesach, but Sukkoth, Shavuot, and more importantly the series of

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Shabbats in between. It is in these that you find the true warp and weave of our relationship to the community, and in finding that, to God.

If you were in Shul over this summer, you would have read ten haftarot that have nothing to do with the parshiot with which they are read. You would have seen the community brought low, and gradually lifted back up. You would have felt the yearning for the messianic age while we live in exile, which is comfortable, but not ideal.

And while you were doing all that, the lifecycle would carry on. You see, the calendar cycle informs the lifecycle, not the reverse.

Let me explain.

All of our Torah, and all of our Tanakh make it clear that we have individual actions for which we are responsible, but it is as a community that we are rewarded, and punished. Many of the rituals and sacrifices described in the Torah are designed to get us back in good standing with the community. The most severe punishment described in the Torah, aside from death, is our being put outside the reach and comfort of our community. Why is community given this much weight? This much Kavod?

Rabbi Stone, formerly of Beth Shalom, once called the mitzvot “An interruption on the journey to self absorption.” Perhaps this larger community of Jews, beyond our immediate family, is likewise an interruption on the journey to self absorption. When your focus is entirely on your own family’s lifecycle events, every death decimates your community. Every birth elates your entire community; every wedding consumes your entire community’s resources.

And when you need the synagogue, or the Rabbi, or Judaism at all during these events, it can feel alien, uncomfortable, antiquated or like painful shoes bought just for that event. And if the community feels like that, according to Jewish thought, so does God.

But when you are in the community, and following the annual cycle, instead you get all of the Torah, the haftarot in sequence that together tell a story,

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and more importantly, you get everyone else's lifecycle. You get the death of Joyce Shayne, zichrona l'vracha. The birth of Sarah Bensimon. The bat mitzvah of Mikaela Yancy. Helping Andrew Cohen have a minyan to say kaddish for his father. The funny drashes, the serious calls to repentance. Mitzvah corps bringing food to someone in distress. Classes that build your bank of knowledge.

And then, when the lifecycle event comes to you - what is Judaism? It is not alien, it is home. It is not uncomfortable, it brings comfort. It is not antiquated, it is immediate. It is not painful shoes; it is your warmest slippers. And likewise, so is God in your life.

When you have an Aufruf, it is the squealing children you don't even know who lift you in laughter to your wedding canopy. When you go to a funeral of someone you don't know, because they may need a minyan, and you hear a wonderful life described, you develop a relationship with someone you may not have met, and brought comfort to her children.

Beth Huppin once described the liturgy as giving you a language for thoughts you may not need just yet. But in the mastering of the liturgy, when the need arises, the language is ready.

Alas, with any relationship, you will only be able to draw out of it what you put into it. Your marriage will suffer without conversation and time spent together. Friends from high school? Gone. I may recognize them on the street and perhaps even wave. That makes them acquaintances not friends. Likewise, my relationship to Judaism, and this community, is only as robust as the effort I put into strengthening it. And the effort is not hard, but it does take time. Time for self reflection and healing the relationships in my life. Time in the seats on regular Shabbats. Time with a shovel in my hand burying some other family's lost loved ones.

Perhaps this is the meaning in the Unataneh Tokef prayer of Yom Kippur of:

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצְדָקָה מֵעֲבִירֶיךָ אֶת־רֵעֵךְ הַגֵּזֶרֶת

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U-t'shuvah, U-t'fillah U-tz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zeirah.

But penitence, prayer and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree.

Seeking rapprochement with the each other, davening regularly with each other, taking care of each other builds our community. And it is this community that will lessen the severity of our troubles.

And, when my low moments come, and I lean back into the arms of my community, I feel the support that those arms provide, and it is home.

Thank You and Shana Tovah.