

Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt
Rosh Hashanah 5780
Facing the World

It's been a year.

Every generation confronts experiences that overwhelm them. We are in our version.

Parkland

11 Killed in Tree of Life Synagogue Massacre

Cambridge Analytica Scandal

Dr Cristine Blasey Ford testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee

Puerto Rico left without electricity for nearly 1 year

Hurricane Michael- the strongest storm to hit the US in 50 years

Hurricane Florence

Family Separation Continues at US Border

California Wildfires

Trade Wars

Sharpies

Corruption

Mueller Report

Impeachment Proceedings Begin

If I could write a commercial for identifying inner chaos it would go like this:
Are you having trouble sleeping at night because of rising tides or vanishing glaciers? You are not alone. If you are having trouble sleeping at night because of families separated at the US border, you are not alone. If you are having trouble sleeping at night because your brain is moving quickly through the vast information it received via text, social media, and alerts on your phone, you are not alone. If any of these things keep you up at night: Gun violence, corruption in the current government, the mental health and future of your children in a vastly changing world, racism, sexism--you are not alone.

As hard as all of your clergy work on our High Holiday sermons, I am sad to tell you that this sermon will not solve the world's ills. But the job of your rabbi is to look out at this world, unveiled, to feel it all and to come back with principles from our tradition that will help not only carry us through this time, but rise from these ashes and rebuild.

To live through these tumultuous times we will need to do 3 things:

1. Look out at destruction and find hope-find the north star and build the resilience to keep going
2. Our texts are filled with the term Am Segulah- a Treasured People- I want to flip this term and say that to get through this moment- in the midst of chaos we need to Treasure People- Build Kinship.
3. Find an eternal story that grounds you and let it be your guiding narrative

Building Resilience

Resilience is a frame of mind. We can be anywhere, looking at anything and know we will be ok. We can make it through.

The year was around 100 of the common era. Jewish life as it was known had been destroyed. The Temple lay in ruin in Jerusalem.

Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva were walking to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Mount Scopus and saw the site of the Temple, they tore their garments in mourning. When

they arrived at the Temple Mount, they saw a fox that emerged from the site of the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies! The place that was only entered once a year by the High Priest on Yom Kippur. The place that the High Priest feared entering for loss of his own life if he did not perform the sacred duties properly.

When they saw the fox emerge, they began weeping. But not Rabbi Akiva—he was laughing. They said to him: How can you laugh? This is the place concerning which it is written: “And the non-priest who approaches shall die” (Numbers 1:51), and now foxes walk in it; and shall we not weep? Rabbi Akiva said to them: That is why I am laughing, I now understand 2 prophecies that were given. Uriah prophesied during the First Temple period that the Temple would be razed to the ground and Zechariah prophesied that men and women would sit in the streets of Jerusalem. Until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, Rabbi Avika was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled, as the two prophecies are linked. Now that the Temple has been destroyed, it is evident he said, that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid. So men and women will again

rejoice in Jerusalem. We will be ok. The Sages said to him: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.

When we step back to think about what is going on in this story:

They are all looking at the same destruction but have completely different reactions. The rabbis cry and Akiva laughs. Getting curious about our emotional response to what is happening before our eyes is critical. Brene Brown, rebbe of the 21st century meets the rabbis of the 1st century with this teaching: “Resilience is more available to people curious about their own line of thinking and behaving.” In this rabbinic story the rabbis are curious to Rabbi Akiva’s laughing and they are open to hearing what it is that he sees.

Rabbi Akiva does not live in the present alone. He lives in the past and the future. The prophecies of Uriah and Zechariah inform how he interprets the present moment. Resilience requires us to be able to both look into the moment we find ourselves AND rise above the present moment to think about the past and the future. We will not live in this moment forever. How

might the past inform us and carry us forward into a future we can help form?

Salvage all that is good. The truth is that another Temple was never rebuilt after the Roman destruction in 70. The rabbis world, their religion, their way of living would forever change and their new way of life would have little semblance to what they knew. When the master narratives that guide our lives inevitably crash, how should we respond? Rabbi Benay Lappe teaches that there are three options: cling to the story as though nothing happened, discard it altogether, or integrate the old with the new and adapt. How did the rabbis do this when their world lay in ruin?

They were master adapters. They changed sacrifice to prayer, they took a Passover ritual that was dependent on the Temple and they moved it to the dining room table, on Yom Kippur they changed a ritual that was focused on the High Priest in the Temple to all of us- pouring out our hearts for forgiveness for a clean slate for the year ahead. We live in the very tradition where resilience and change have lived side by side for milenia. The ability to face the current moment, to hold on to our values and to

innovate to meet the future is the foundation of the Jewish tradition. It is ours and we need to carry it into this moment.

Kinship. We need it. Mother Teresa once diagnosed the world's ills saying: "We've forgotten that we belong to each other."

When kinship is absent- we are listless, there is no foundation beneath us.

Kinship- a bond with humans we know and those we have never met is a foundational part of the universe. It is needed even more so in heightened moments- times of chaos and uncertainty. In her remarkable book "A Paradise Built in Hell", Rebecca Solnit writes in times of crisis, "when all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss. Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a back door into paradise, the paradise which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper." (page 4) Kinship means we ride this wave of our current present

together and we should do our best to respond to this moment holding human dignity and connection as the highest values.

A Story

We just commemorated the 18th anniversary of 9/11 one of the worst calamities to ever occur on American soil. The way we survived as a country, as a city, as individuals was through kinship. We could not slow the disaster, but we could use every ounce of human courage, strength and adrenaline to help our fellow humans. Michael Noble, a senior executive at Morgan Stanley was on the 66th floor of the south tower when the first plane hit the north tower. Noble and several friends and colleagues decided to evacuate having been through the 1993 attack on the towers. He says, "I went to the stairwell, and the stairs were crowded- when I reached the lobby, there was so much debris that I couldn't budge the revolving doors. So I go to the other doors, and there was a young woman there and a huge chunk of debris falls from the sky right in front of us. We knew we had to get out so I remember grabbing her hand and saying, "Let's go." We pushed out and ran across away from the building toward Liberty street...as I looked around every car was on fire. It looked like a

war zone. I started walking up West Side Highway and I looked up and saw this speck in the sky- it was a man who had jumped. I remember his arms and his legs just trying to grab at air and I watched him fall and I remember thinking How can I help this man? Is there some way I can communicate with him as he is about to die? And for the the last fifteen floors he fell I watched and tried to hold his hand, to be somehow in communication with him.” Kinship isn’t about saving everyone, it’s about being present in chaos. Noticing humanity and making space for it. Connecting the deepest part of ourselves with our human kin.

There are thousands of stories just like this one of strangers helping each other, of loved ones searching, and a city uniting to nurture each other. As crisis fades either on the national scale or the global scale, many of us go back to our “normal” lives- lived with motes between us and the strangers around us- but what is important to remember is that kinship is the foundation of the world.

Early on in the Torah in Genesis 4 we are told the story of kinship gone astray. It is the story of Cain and Abel. The story of 2 brothers, one who brings a better offering than the other. Cain is so jealous of God's positive response to Abel that he rises up and kills his brother Abel. When God approaches Cain asking where his brother Abel is, Cain responds with the words that have echoed throughout human history "HaShomer Achi Anochi"? Am I my brother's keeper? God's answer to Cain is undoubtedly yes. The Kli Yakar, a 17th century commentary on the Torah, he says, פליאה גדולה על קין איך אמר לא ידעתי אם טעה בזה לומר לא יראה יה ולא יבין במעשה התחתונים- It is a great mystery how Cain could say that he doesn't know where his brother is! Did he make a mistake in this [as if] to say [to himself] 'God will not see what is happening here on earth.' God responds to Cain saying, 'How could you not know that you were supposed to guard your brother? It is a logical mitzvah....the intellect obligates [us] to keep this mitzvah (of guarding each other) even if it wasn't commanded, for if we were to forgo it, each person and his neighbor would be swallowed up.'

Cain's curse for not seeing humanity and raising kinship above jealousy is to become a restless vagabond. Cain will roam without kinship, without

family, without a home for the rest of his life. Relationships are the foundation of our worlds, seeing ourselves in another, connecting over the trials and joys of life- without the connection- we lose ourselves.

Rebecca Solnit writes: 'A world could be built on the basis of connection, and to do so would redress the long divides that produce everyday pain, and loneliness ...The paradises built in hell show us both what we want and what we can be....'(page 313) if we heed the call.

Stories

Historian Yuval Noah Harari writes in his book Sapiens:

“Sapiens rule the world, because we are the only animal that can cooperate flexibly in large numbers. We can create mass cooperation networks, in which thousands and millions of complete strangers work together towards

common goals. The real difference between us and chimpanzees is the mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively.

This mysterious glue is made of stories, not genes. We cooperate effectively with strangers because we believe in things like gods, nations, money and human rights.”

Stories are necessary to ground us, to help us make meaning out of this chaotic world, especially in uncertain times. Stories remind us of who we are, what we are fighting for, where we have been and what matters eternally to us. We may wonder why we put our neck out in moments when we feel vulnerable ourselves--think of this year- Tree of Life, Poway, white supremacist rallies- to name just a few moments of terror. We put our necks out because we believe in a common narrative- defending the vulnerable because it is who we are and it is what we were redeemed to do.

So here is a reminder of our eternal story. It's the story of a people, an enslaved people. A people who worked through sweat and tears. It's the story of a small band of people who never gave up believing that there was

something else out there. A better life, a more just society, God. They rebelled against the Pharaoh, they bore children even in the darkest of times because they believed in a future, they recognized someone who could carry the people out of Egypt and safeguarded him- built him a cradle as a baby from pitch and sent him down the Nile.

It was not until these people marked themselves as wanting to be collectively part of a people - part of a redemptive story-that they could be redeemed. The Mekhilta, an early collection of midrashim tells us that with the slaughtering of the paschal lamb, right before the 10th plague the Israelites marked the inside of their houses as Rabbi Natan teaches it was a sign for the Israelites. They had to see themselves as part of the redemptive story in order to leave slavery.

Their story was not a straight path to freedom and redemption but a winding path through the desert. The story includes loss, pain, and hardship, but it also includes a beloved community, miracles and wonders, resilience and finally redemption. It's a story we all need right now. It reminds us how we must resist tyrants, stand against injustice, form

kinship, sing in hardship, and remain steadfast that there is life worth living, there is a future after this chaos and we have to work to get there.

A Story

In January of this past year we were in an uproar as a nation about family separation at the US border. Aaron and I repeatedly angsted over what we could do as religious leaders at this dark moment in US history. It seemed hard to figure out what to do systemically (other than of course supporting important organizations like HIAS), but that didn't feel like enough. So we connected with folks on our social action team at Adas and we booked plane tickets to McAllen, Texas. It felt important to see with our own eyes the stories we were hearing on the news. To be witnesses. So in March we headed down. On the plane we heard stories of fear, people telling us to be careful at the border- that it was not a safe place to be. But with our own eternal narrative ingrained in our hearts we knew we needed to go.

We met with Sister Norma at Catholic Charities who had set up a weigh station for immigrants headed from detention or holding facilities to family

or friends all around the country. We met incredible lawyers working to find children that had been separated from their parents. And then, late in the afternoon we headed, with 7 congregants across the border to Matamoros Mexico to meet with families who had set up a tent city as they waited for days, months to legally cross the border and claim asylum in the United States. It was there that we met mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandmothers, uncles and aunts. Kinship was formed around dreams of a better life, dreams of being able to find work and opportunity.

We bonded with a particular family. The Gonzalez family. They had traveled on foot from Nicaragua with their 2 year old son who had been hit by a stray bullet in the neck. Little William's parents wanted to provide him with a safe place to live, a loving community, a chance to experience boyhood. Before leaving Mexico, I gave my cell phone number to William senior. In this family's eyes I saw our people's story- fleeing violence, desperate for a chance at life. All my heart could see was their pain and I couldn't leave without binding myself to them- holding myself accountable to do what I could to help them cross that border. I told them if their sponsor fell through, they should call me.

2 weeks later- a text came through- William and Meylin had lost their sponsor in the US and were in need of someone to help them. They had been at the border for 53 days and they worried they would lose their spot “in line” to enter the United States. So the 9 of us who had traveled to Mexico sat together- after doing a little research into the family background and verifying their story- we all felt the call to respond- the call from our own story, from our sense of kinship with this family. Was it going to solve the border crisis? No. Was it going to change the zero tolerance policy- that is still in practice today? No. But it would make a difference to this family and would be a religious response to the chaos we find ourselves living in right now.

A congregant from the group stepped forward. She offered her home- she said that she had been named for her aunt who had not made it out of the Shoah alive and she had vowed that if she ever was given the chance to save a life, she would do it. So on the night before Pesach, William Meylin and little William arrived at the DC bus station- wheeling 1 small suitcase, exhausted from the 22 hour bus ride from Texas- ready to build a new life.

We cannot stop chaos, it's part of life. Human history tells us that we will live through enormously difficult times- how we survive, will not only shape us, but will shape future generations and how they look upon this time both for guidance, for resilience, for kinship and for grounding. We have to be Rabbi Avika at this moment in the face of chaos, we have to innovate, we have to salvage what is good. We have to love each other and to TAKE OUR eternal story with us, let it give us strength, and be our guiding north star into the future. May we rise out of these days with a future in sight, a web of community around us and our eternal story.

Shanah tovah.

