

There Ain't No Jewish Zombies:

Night of the Living Spread

Shannah Tovah. I want to begin with a story. When Michelle and I were first dating, I took her to see a movie I was excited to see, and much to my surprise, she was also interested. I took her to see I am Legend, starring Will Smith. About halfway through the movie, she looked at me and said, “Is this a Zombie movie?!?? I can’t believe you took me to a zombie movie!!!” To this day, it is the only zombie movie I have ever seen -- and Michelle still thinks I tricked her, I thought she knew!

The truth of the matter is I also don't like zombie movies. I don't like the gore, I don't like the moral ambiguity, the no-win situations, the violence. I really dislike the genre entirely. I don't like being scared. I don't like being shocked by my entertainment. Our lives are shocking and sensational enough. That's not my ideal escape at all. And after the year and a half that we have all endured, can you blame me? So many moments have felt like the beginning of a post apocalyptic zombie movie. From March of 2020 when CORONA forced the world to shut down, to civil unrest on the streets, to riots on capitol hill, to global-

warming impacted weather events, to shortages of everything and including Toilet paper. I don't like to watch these films or consume Zombified media because it is beginning to feel too close to home.

Another problem I have with the Zombification of popular culture is that there is a certain fatalism baked into the Zombie narrative or trope. There's only one real way this can end -- with the zombies winning. In the zombie apocalypse, it's not about rebuilding, preserving, or improving society -- it's about pure survival. The trope, more often than not, dictates that the "survivors" be confronted with the most brutal and primal representations of humanity's own responses to such horror and trauma. The potential for the success of the protagonists to continue to survive indefinitely is ambiguous at best. Simply put: they have no chance to make it through this ordeal.

Call me romantic, but I like stories with a little more hope. I don't like Zombie movies not only because they scare the *tuches* off of me -- but also because they don't offer a vision for life beyond what pure survival looks like. And let's face it -- we've all been there re: pure survival. The first days of the pandemic where we all felt like this would

be over shortly -- we told ourselves that we could do this for a week, a month, or two, or three? We convinced ourselves that it was ok to fall apart. To let this or that go -- to focus on what we needed purely to survive. And that's what we did. We survived. But that is not living a life of meaning. That is not living a life of seeking and value. Mere survival is not the goal of living a Jewish life.

Imagine if the Jewish story were told only using Zombie movie tropes -- "they came for us, that stunk, we survived, and they are still after us... let's run." Is a far cry from the "they came for us, God and the Jewish people prevailed, let's eat." So I say -- there are no Jewish Zombies. Zombies cannot be Jewish as they necessitate a narrative without hope for renewal and re-invigoration. Zombies cannot be Jewish as they offer a world without hope, resilience and t'shuvah -- of returning to the values and actions we set aside in the name of survival.

Zombie movies don't give us room to tell a less exciting story. A story about how to put the world back together post- or even mid-apocalypse. But the Jewish story does. It teaches us how to regroup, reinvigorate and renew ourselves, our families and our

communities. Think about it -- the Exodus -- the seminal narrative of the Jewish people -- shares many of the same themes and motifs as Zombie or post-apocalyptic-literature. It follows the ups and downs of a rag-tag group of survivors attempting to flee the pursuit of an aggressive and brutal horde (of Egyptians) only to be met with the impossible task of crossing the sea. Now in a zombie film, the only solution would be for the Israelites or Moses to sacrifice some of their humanity. They would be forced to make an impossible choice -- to choose between morality/values and (some of) their lives. Our tradition teaches that there is ALWAYS hope. That even in the 11th hour, seas can split, miracles can happen -- there is always room for redemption.

I don't need to outline for all of you, my shul people, the countless times throughout the bible and, indeed, Jewish history that this narrative takes place. It is the central Myth (with a capital M) of the Jewish people, and all of our narratives flow from it. In essence, Judaism teaches us that no matter how dark the world might get -- the potential for light is just around the corner. And so for us -- here -- in this moment -- we must remind ourselves that there is always hope. Hope for revitalization, hope

for renewal, hope for growth beyond our current circumstances, hope for t'shuvah -- for returning to a semblance of what we had before. For without hope for a better tomorrow, how can we galvanize ourselves to build that future, today?

Judaism plays with this intersection of hope and despair quite interestingly in the use of a particular blessing. It is one that is said as part of the Amidah, the central prayer made up of 19 blessings. But it is also used when seeing someone that you haven't seen in a long time. The blessing is "*barukh atah adonai eloheinu melek haolam michayey hameytim.*" Praised be Adonai, sovereign of the universe, who brings life to the dead." Now I know what some might be thinking -- Didn't the rabbi say there **aren't any Jewish zombies**? I stand by that. By reciting this blessing upon meeting an acquaintance that one hasn't seen in a long time, we are saying "it as if you had come back from the dead" OR to put it more playfully -- ohhh -- I'm glad to see you're still around. You see Jews don't believe in resurrection (mostly), and we DEFINITELY don't believe in zombies, at least not as pop-culture understands them. The blessing and phrase "*mechayey hametim*" also connotes the ability to

reinvigorate and revitalize something. It is connected to the cycle of the seasons and the rebirth of vegetation and growth. It refers to the interconnectedness of the human lifecycle and how the stories we tell are echoes of the ones that came before. It reminds us of our ability to do *t'shvuah* -- to return and put things back together.

And most importantly, the revitalization of the dead for us modern Jewish people gives us permission to believe in the power of reinvigoration during times of trouble. Friends. NOW is the time to re-evaluate where we have been, and assess where we want to go. What is the Judaism that we want our children and grandchildren to inherit? What is the Judaism we want to build for the future?

Is our Judaism a living embodiment of the values that we have inherited and hold dear or is it a zombified husk -- aimlessly shambling from one place to another? I say, Emphatically No. Our tradition -- our Judaism is not merely a zombification of values... it is actually a living breathing organism full of hope... The recitation of *mehayeh hameitim* when seeing someone we haven't seen in a long time does not suppose that they actually died, but it is an affirmation of the opportunity at hand

to reinvigorate whatever previous relationship was there. So too must we begin that process with our Judaism and our synagogue community.

So many of us have spent the past 18 months trying to get through this pandemic the best that we could. Frequently, that meant retreating into the safety of our homes. For the past 18 months we have been living in a zombie movie -- seeking to survive -- grasping at tenuous hope that the world would change or get better. Here's the hard truth -- I don't know if/when it will change or get better... unless we, as a community -- as a people seek to make it better. All of the incidental connections that we used to make just by going out and being social have been taken from us... it's easier to just retreat -- to just survive. Again, that is not the Jewish way. Here's the thing -- we have all just experienced, and are currently experiencing a traumatic event on a global level.

As I said before, Judaism has experience in these matters. Just 7 weeks ago, we chanted eicha in this very room (or in the Mandel Sanctuary) on Tisha B'Av. Eicha, or the book of lamentations, chronicles the story of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and reads like something out of a post-apocalyptic horror novel. The violence and

trauma experienced by that generation of Jews people (re)defined what Judaism was and has become today. From the literal ashes of Jerusalem, the Rabbinic voice takes hold of the Jewish narrative and we enter into an age that we now call the tannaitic period -- where the early rabbis struggled to make sense of the new geopolitical and religious reality in which they found themselves. In this context, as the walls of Jerusalem were falling, we have the story of Yochanan ben Zakkai -- the great sage who -- when confronted with the reality that Jerusalem and the Temple were lost, snuck out of the city in a coffin -- and asserted that he would take village of Yavneh and her sages as a consolation prize. He didn't ask for what was already lost, but advocated for what could still be... for what remained of the faith and the people that he loved with all of his heart and being. He sought a way for the Jewish community to do more than just survive the current catastrophe, he envisioned a world where Judaism grew and thrived. In a sense, he was seeking t'shuvah for the entire Jewish people. By learning from this catastrophe, he sought to lay the foundation for a Judaism that would grow and thrive to this day.

That is our task as we enter into 5782, and emerge from 2021. You see, our lives this past year have contained so much suffering and pain and trauma. Our task is not to live in that pain and suffering, but rather to emerge from it, to return from it, to a place of renewed growth and being. That is the essence of *t'shuvah*, of return. We have spent so much time just surviving... now is the time to begin to thrive again. The stories and blessings of our tradition don't offer an answer to suffering, but they do offer a bridge from suffering to healing, and from healing to resilience, reinvigoration, and a place of thriving. 2020 and 2021 have been extraordinarily difficult for us all. And it nearly destroyed us. But we need not remain zombies as we move into a new year. We can use the teachings of our collective tradition to remind us how to have hope and grow from these experiences.

And so I call for all of us to do *t'shuvah* in the coming year. Not to repent for past misdeeds, but to learn to live to thrive again --not merely survive-- in the new reality in which we find ourselves. Like Moses or Rabbi Yochanan Zakai, it is up to us to re-envision together what Judaism in a post-COVID world will look like. How we will gather, who will

gather, and what we do to make and find meaning. I pray that each of us is able to see some small “returns” and move from a place of mere survival to a place of revival.

May we all shuv -- turn towards growth, meaning, and life in the coming year.

L'Shanah tovah U'Metukah.