

Building the Future at a Time of Uncertainty

Today begins the period on the calendar we call the *Yamim Noraim*. The Hebrew here is nuanced: it means that these days are filled with both **awe and fear**. Each time we come to this period on the Jewish calendar, we are asked to confront weighty issues: the finitude of our lives and the lives of those we love; the measure of our growth and of our failings; our dreams and our disappointments. We are asked to confront all that we don't know. We recite the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer to remind ourselves of our uncertain futures. Who among us will die? Who will be healthy? Will we face economic hardship? Will we flourish and thrive?

Every year, during these *Yamim Noraim*, we remind ourselves of all that we don't know. This year, we confront these weighty issues in the context of profound communal uncertainty. The pandemic has turned our world upside down. And we don't know when—and if—the variants will recede and what our lives will look like in the aftermath. Remember this past spring? Remember when we thought the light at the end of the tunnel was finally in sight? It was OK to take off our masks; it was fine to get on a plane. In July, we thought these High Holidays would be a time of renewal and reconnection. We were looking forward to praying in community; all of us together in our beautiful sanctuary. We were looking forward to taking off our masks and seeing the smiles on each other's faces. We were looking forward to

giving long and overdue hugs to so many that we had only seen over screens during the past year. We were looking forward to hearing children's voices and seeing the wonder on their faces as they listened to the shofar's blasts.

Instead, here we are. We look around this sanctuary and see very clearly that we are not quite there yet. It is wonderful that many of us are here in-person—although we miss seeing your entire faces because of the masks! But many of you are not here; many of you are watching this service at home on the Livestream. It remains a scary and uncertain time. Each day, we need to make decisions about our health, our safety, and the safety of our families and friends. That calculus is different for each of us. I assure you that your Beth Sholom clergy, staff and lay leadership understand and respect all of your decisions: both those who have come in-person, and those who are watching at home.

It is harder to celebrate a New Year in the midst of this palpable uncertainty. For many of us, it is one thing to chant the words of *Unetaneh Tokef* in a more normal year where the precariousness between life and death can feel more theoretical. But this year is different. This year, we join with all the world wondering when this pandemic will end and what the world will look like in its wake.

In some ways, we can compare this moment to the experience of our ancestors in Egypt. The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, can be translated as

narrowness. In *Mizrayim*, our ancestors were in a tight, narrow place. In a different way, we too, are in such a place. The pandemic has made our worlds smaller. We see fewer people. We go to fewer places. Literally and figuratively, things are cramped and diminished. Yet even in this hard moment, we see glimpses of a wider, more expansive place. Soon, the Delta variant will be under control. Soon, our kids will be back in school. Soon, we will celebrate life cycle events together. We will dance at weddings and hold each other at funerals. Soon, soon, soon. We know that we are far better off now than we were last winter, but we have not yet crossed our metaphoric Sea of Reeds just yet.

At this moment, we are in what religious anthropologists call a **liminal state**. Throughout history and across cultures, we humans can find ourselves betwixt and between. Standing at the Sea, our ancestors were in just this predicament. They had left slavery in Egypt, but they were not yet on the other side. They were at a threshold, just the kind of juncture that we find ourselves in today.

As individuals, most of you have been in liminal space, even if you have not thought of it in those terms. Our Jewish tradition has offered you a framework to guide you through these experiences. For example, if you have lost a loved one, you know that there is a powerful and destabilizing time right after their death. From the time of their death until the time they were buried, you were in a time of **liminality**.

You had a devastating loss, but you were not yet a mourner. The funeral service and burial brought you from an inchoate state of shock through to *shivah* when you could begin to mourn and to grieve. This is what ritual does. It moves us through uncertainty to take us across those in-between states.

Throughout these many months of the pandemic, we have all been in an extended period of **liminality**. We knew who we were before this pandemic, but we are still not certain who we will be—or how things will look—when we get to the other side. We have no ritual for this, we have no roadmap or guide. And so how do we cross this Sea of uncertainty? The answer, my friends is **faith**. Faith is the tool that our Jewish tradition provides to meet uncertainty with courage and with hope. I am not talking about a simple faith which suggests that God has reasons for all of this, and everything is surely going to turn out for the best. Judaism offers no simple, rational reason for human suffering.

What our tradition does offer is a complex faith, a faith that allows us—as a people, and as a community of faith—to affirm that what may be unknowable *at this moment* will one day hold meaning and will help us make sense of the world. Right now, this is the faith we need. A faith that will guide us through these times of uncertainty, a faith that gives us the strength to create the seeds for a new future even when the shape of that future is still uncertain. As Jews, we have a deep

history of doing this; we have an inheritance that we can turn to. We are not the first people to feel uncertain, to be confused, and to have our worlds turned upside down.

This was the faith that the Holy One of Blessing promised to Moses when *Moshe Rabbeinu* had reached one of the lowest points of his life, a moment of fear, uncertainty and confusion. Moses, as you know, had shepherded the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt; had led them through the crossing at the Sea; had stood with them at Sinai when God revealed God's presence. So what happened next? Moshe came down from receiving the Torah expecting to share God's teaching with the people. Instead, he found the Israelites worshipping a Golden Calf. Moshe's world was turned upside down. In anger and confusion, he smashed the tablets of the Covenant that he had been carrying.

When Moshe returned to God, he was despondent. He now goes on to question the entire nature of the enterprise and the worthiness of the people he has been asked to lead. It is a time of rupture and confusion. Moshe now longs for certainty. And so he makes a bold request: He wants proof positive of God's existence. He asks to see God face to face.

But this is not possible. Not for Moshe, not for any of us. Instead, God offers this: in one of the most enigmatic divine utterances in the entire Torah, God says: "I

will make all of my goodness pass before you, but no person may see me and live. As my presence passes by, I will place you in the cleft of this rock and shield you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you will see my back.”

God’s response that Moshe may **not** see God’s face but only God’s back has been a source of endless rabbinic commentary. Why would the Holy One of Blessing refuse Moshe the comfort and certainty of the fullness of the divine presence? Moshe was clearly looking for reassurance. Seeing God’s face would have helped Moshe to maintain faith in his mission. Why would God turn away from that? Why was Moshe only allowed to see God’s back?

God is teaching Moshe that to be human is to be limited in our knowledge of how the future will unfold. At times of uncertainty, we must muster the **faith** to act, even when the outcome of our actions will always be unknowable. Sometimes, if we are fortunate, we may get a hint of things to come, a glimmer of hope that can propel us forward. This is what seeing God’s back suggests. We won’t know the outcome; and yet we will still strive to move forward.

Today, we are all still living in the midst of deep upheaval and dislocation. Like Moshe, we want to see God’s face and feel God’s embrace and know that there is meaning to all of this. We want nothing more than the certainty of knowing that

things are going to turn out ok. But what God is saying to Moshe is that we can't always know *in the moment* what something means; the meaning of the present is only to be known in retrospect. Right now, we only can see God's back. Our job is to muster the faith to move forward even when the path ahead is far from clear.

As Jews, we have lived through many moments of deep disruption and upheaval. Moments when the path forward was absolutely uncertain. Moments when in the midst of a crisis, there was no way of knowing what it would all mean. Only in hindsight were we able to see how, out of the darkest of moments, we were able to build a bridge to the future.

One such moment in Jewish history occurred in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple. The entire ecosystem of Jewish life came crashing down in the year 70 CE when the Temple was destroyed; when Jewish sovereignty in their land was lost; when an entire system of sacrificial worship came to an end.

One rabbi decided to take a risk. He asked his students to sneak him out of Jerusalem in a coffin so that he could make a request of the Roman General Vespasian. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai imagined a new kind of Judaism—one in which study and prayer would replace priests and sacrifices. Rabbi Yohanan asked Vespasian to allow him to establish a small center for the study of sacred Jewish

Commented [DGK1]: This section is probably too long

texts in a village in the Galilee called Yavneh. Vespasian granted Rabbi Yohanan's request.

The Judaism that Rabbi Yohanan envisioned did not develop overnight. Rabbi Yohanan's academy and the teaching of its Sages grew over two centuries and laid the groundwork for what later would become the Mishnah, and then 200 years after that, the Talmud. Rather than trying to rebuild the Temple, the rabbis of Yavneh created houses of study, *Batei Midrash*, and later houses of worship, *Batei Keneset*. In Yavneh, Judaism was transformed from a centralized, sacrificial cultic system regulated by the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem, into a more democratic and diverse way of life that could be practiced by Jews anywhere and everywhere.

But remember, that's the story of Rabbi Yohanan we tell in **hindsight**. That's the story we tell from the perspective of 2,000 years of Jewish history. At the moment that Rabbi Yohanan decided to sneak himself out of Jerusalem, he had no way of knowing what would emerge. Rabbi Yohanan, like Moshe Rabbeinu, might have wanted a sign from God in that moment. But God's presence would only be known in retrospect; at that moment, Rabbi Yohanan could only see God's back. And it took several generations before Rabbi Yohanan's form of Judaism would become the basis of the Judaism that we practice today.

This New Year feels reminiscent of times in our past when the future was deeply uncertain. We are not only trying to move on from the upheaval of a pandemic. We come to this New Year at a time when our politics remain divided; when facts in this country are a matter of debate; when our planet feels increasingly imperiled, and when our ability to marshal our energies collectively to address these complex problems feels ever more fragmented. We come to this New Year aware that the social fabric in this country is fraying. And we are afraid. Our uncertainty about the future permeates our very sense of well-being as we contemplate the start of the New Year. These last 18 months have been a time of shattering and a time of dislocation.

The Hebrew word for shattering is *shavar*. *Shavar* also means brokenness, destruction, calamity. It is from the word *shavar* that we get the shofar call *shevarim*—the three broken sounds following the *Tekiyah*: Three cries, three articulations of grief punctuated by gasps. *Shevarim* embodies our collective sense of dislocation around all that we have been through.

The fact that we are living through a great shattering means that we may never regain the lives we knew before the pandemic. We may have to grieve all that's been lost. But this is not the end of the story. Like Moshe Rabbeinu, there are a new set of tablets waiting to be written. Like Rabbi Yohanan, there are new ways

of envisioning how we can come to know God. Because living through a time of shattering now does not mean that there is **only** loss ahead. It means that we also have a chance, perhaps more so than we have had in a long time, to be dreaming about building a future that will be different; one that will be new and alive in ways that we cannot yet know. **Audible: BSC Initiatives.....**

Again, the Hebrew root of *shavar* is instructive. The modern Hebrew word for **crisis** also comes from *shavar*—a *mashber*. But a *mashber* in Modern Hebrew is also a **birthing stool**. In the Hebrew language, a crisis is an opportunity to give birth to something heretofore unimagined.

On this Rosh Hashanah day when we celebrate the birth of Creation, we must envision bringing forth new life even at this time of disruption. That is what we are asked to trust as we begin this New Year. We can't see God's face right now, but we can build something beautiful that will come out of this. If we can trust that there are new forms that we can build together—as a Beth Sholom community—as a Jewish community—and as a nation—we can give birth to new life in the midst of this upheaval. But to be successful, we will need to be patient, fierce, bold, imaginative and unafraid to embark in new directions that we have not yet fully imagined.

We have been gifted with an inheritance of those who have created life and meaning out of the most uncertain of times: let us remember that we are heirs to a tradition that builds life out of disruption and uncertainty. Let us live out that faith—so that in looking back, the Book of Life that we are writing right now will hold blessing for us all—and for this world which is in such need—and to that, let us all say...Amen.

Shana tova tikateivu.