

“Joy Comes in The Morning” Rosh Hashana and Kol Nidre, 2017, Rabbi Andrea L. Merow

Decades ago, Mr. Cohen was eating dinner at a large resort in the Borsht belt. The waiter walks over to his customer and says, “Sir, is anything OK?”

Funny, right? We laugh because in some ways this may describe how we live in the world. Sometimes things seem less OK. When events in our personal or collective lives do not seem right, our moods and actions reflect this reality. If I had to write a communal “how we feel” prayer, like the *Ashamnu* confessional, it might read: “We are unsettled, we are not calm, we are frustrated, we cannot converse with those we disagree with, we are fearful...”

The writer of the Psalms proclaims, “Why so downcast, my soul?” (Psalm 42) and “Out of the depths I call to You, God.” (Psalm 130)

The depths of despair are where the writer of these Psalms felt he was more than two thousand years ago, before the pogroms, before the Shoah, before we could distinguish between a first world or third world problem, our ancestors struggled with a disquieting of their souls and with despair. We do today as well.

During difficult times, some ask where is God, when innocent people die in terror attacks or floods. What exactly is God doing when Nazis march? We asked then, we ask now.

Of course, the Psalmist almost always finds a way to overcome despair. In Psalm 30, Ba’erev yalin beci, v’la boker rina. One lies down weeping at night; but joy comes in the morning.

We yearn for dawn, for joy, or even for hope.

An amazing concept and beautiful metaphor. Night is about times when our souls are saddened or burdened. “At night we weep. Joy comes in the morning.”

Overt racism, increased anti-Semitism, hate speech, attacks on civility, terrorism, testing of nuclear weapons, hurricanes and earthquakes; we have sadness that has been brought on by human decrees and natural disasters. I have felt despair over the increase of hatred, at a lack of civility, and the loss of our ability to see God’s face in each other.

There are communal reasons that some feel disquieted, and also personal realities of illness, deaths, loss of a job, disappointment, that many in this room feel. Grant it, some of our suffering results from the first world lives we are privileged to lead, some of our suffering comes from our own anxiety. This does not diminish the feeling that something is not normal or right with how society is behaving right now. If you do not ever struggle with a sense of sadness, or despair, you are lucky – you might even be a fictional character. I am certain there are not many of you because the human condition **IS** that we experience difficult times. In those difficult times we can find meaning, purpose, and even hope.

We may blame God when despair occurs. Let’s consider the nature of what we know about how God works in the world, that might help us to turn our “sackcloth to dancing?” and live with hope or joy.

Our people have a rich history of how we understand despair, the problem is we did not get the God part right: Our narrative is based on a theology that many do not believe. It says our troubles are Divine punishment for our bad behavior. The greatest example of this is the story we tell about the destruction

of the 2nd Temple. Our rabbis taught the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinam* –senseless hatred. Really? God is that vindictive?

We Jews had much in-fighting in the first century CE, and could not unite to fight a foreign power, but it is theologically dangerous to state that the bad that befalls us is solely due to our behavior, and is a punishment from God. We should not blame victims, or those who suffer. The more likely explanation for the destruction and exile is geo-political and not theological. Rome was mightier than we; we were part of their land acquisition plan. To think that exile was Divine punishment means that God intervenes in history, once in a while, but chooses to not intervene at other times. I think that post Holocaust we can agree that it might be blasphemy to assert that the wanton destruction of humans by other humans is Divinely ordained. We just can't believe that God works in the world in such ways. God is about creation, co-creating with us, compassion and love.

God cries with us. We share emotions of sadness and disappointment with God as expressed in the beautiful scene in the Talmud where God is described as literally crying at the alter on the news that a relationship has dissolved. How much the more so is God crying when humans hate or are violent to one another, on when a natural disaster occurs.

When we think about natural disasters, we don't REALLY think that they are Divine punishment for anything.

So how does God work in this world, and how can we work with God as co-creators, so that we can find the joy of the morning.

Rabbinic scholar Rabbi Brad Shavit Artson teaches Process Theology. He writes: "God sets the world in motion, creates the environment for all creatures to live in relationship to one another. All of our actions may have consequences, but God is not coercive and God does not intervene in the natural process of the world."\* I add that God is watching, sensing, weeping with us, and is the presence that lures us to respond with compassion and mercy.

Rabbi Shavit Artson wrote a poem after Hurricane Harvey called:

### **How Not to Respond to a Flood**

Don't respond with theology.

God isn't angry, and God doesn't want devastation.

Your sin didn't cause the flood

that swept away your home, your town.

God doesn't punish Houston, and

didn't punish Miami or San Francisco, or New Orleans,

because God isn't in the storm.

God weeps at our suffering. God loves."

The poem and the theology continues, with the concept that we are the co-creators of our responses to bad with God, **WE** bring hope and God's presence into the world. The poem continues:

Don't close your doors.

The point of your great big building is the people it can shelter.

You can always redo the floors

or get another carpet.

The time to shelter the homeless is now.

God wants to send an Ark.

Be that Ark.

As you treat the least of them ...

Respond with compassion, deeds of kindness, with open hands, with love,

... so shall you be treated."

On the High Holidays we have competing images of God that are meant to moderate each other. The God of *Din*, judgement, and the God of *Rachamim*, compassion. I contend that *din*, does not mean justice in the way we think of courts or a legal system, or how it was treated in the medieval poems in this prayer book. God is not writing your fate and sealing it this week based on your past behavior. It makes for concrete imagery in poems like *Une Tane Tokef*, but it is not how God works in the world. It is unrealistic to believe that changing our ways, apologizing averts tragic events. The poem does work if it reminds us of the fragility of life, the shortness of our days, and inspires us to be better. Apologizing repairs relationships; it does not cure disease.

What then could *din* and *rahamim* mean? *Din* –law, must mean natural law. *Din* means that God created the Universe and the world works in ways that follow natural law, every action has reactions, nothing is predetermined, because all of creation is constantly making choices that affect creation. God created creation, now the world follows natural law, and so God cries when the natural order of the world creates floods, earthquakes, disease. God is saddened by the ways that humans teach each other to hate. That's *din* – the way the world works - sometimes unfair, having us born into privilege, while others are not, some have good health, others not.

We also describe God as *El Rahum v'hanun*– God of compassion. God's presence in our souls lures us to make good, compassionate, generous decisions. God's essence of *rahamim* is seen in the merciful ways we treat others and ourselves.

Rabbi Naomi Levi shares the following parable in the name of Rabbi Harold Schulweis, z"l about where God can be found:

"When God was creating the world God shared a secret with the angels, human beings will be created in the image of God. The angels were jealous, outraged. Why should humans be entrusted with such a precious gift when they are flawed mortals?"

The angels decided to steal God's image. With the divine image in the angels' hands, they needed to pick a place to hide it so mere mortals would never find it. The angel Gabriel suggested they hide God's image at the top of the highest mountain. The others objected, "one day humans will learn to climb and will find it."

The angel Michael said, "let's hide it at the bottom of the sea." "No," said the angels, "humans will find a way to dive to into the sea and find it." One by one the angels suggested hiding places, they were all rejected. Then Uriel, the wisest angel, said. "I know a place where people will never look." So the angels hid the precious holy image of God deep within the human soul. And to this day, God's image lies hidden in us, waiting to be discovered by each person.

God lives and works in each one of us, **IN** each and every person. God is the lure that leads us toward good. When we see ungodly, evil acts perpetrated by people, we understand that those people have not yet discovered the pull of God's presence in them. But they can. This is T'shuva; and as Maimonides teaches, it is always possible to return, or to sense God's Presence within us.

Where do we find God, and how do we escape despair? We dig deep into our selves, uncover God's Presence in our souls, and then we work overtime to help others, and to bring good into the world. We must be God's embodiment of compassion. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel z"l wrote, "we either surrender to the might and threat of evil or persist in the earnestness of our existence." In the face of bad times, we must resist the urge toward despair, and persist in bringing goodness, compassion and generosity into the world. We must each be the ark for those in a flood.

In the aftermath of tragedy, we see God's Presence in the compassionate, gracious and loving response of humanity. Here are a few examples:

-This year the Jewish community in Whitefish, Montana was harassed by Neo Nazi White supremacists. Several families had private information, addresses and info about their children put on a neo Nazi web site meant to incite violence. I visited the shul in Montana last winter to lend support to the rabbi and her community. Though they are traumatized, they are also overwhelmed by kindness. They have crates of cards and gifts of support from all over the world. Our community sent their shul a case of TaskyKakes. The Anti -Defamation League sent Bagels, whitefish and a legal team, along with Southern Poverty Law Center. The most amazing show of support came from the many local businesses who produced a map of Montana with the words "Love Lives Here" and plastered them all over town, making each of those businesses new targets for the neo-Nazis. In those signs, we saw humanity, and God creating good. The *din*, the natural law in the world is that people hate. The *rachamim* is our compassionate response to the hate.

As you know, this summer racism and anti-Semitism, hate, reared its ugly head in Virginia. Our young congregant Jenna Ferman was just stating her new job at the Hillel at UVA when violence broke out in Charlottesville. Heather Heyer was there to stand up against hate. She was killed when a white supremacist rammed into her. It is horrifying. It also might be expected that when haters come together, some of them may come unglued and be violent. That is *Din*, the way the world works. The response of Heather's mom was all *rachamim* – all mercy. Two weeks after Heather was killed her mom said "She died doing what was right. My heart is broken, but I am forever proud of her." Then she announced the Heather Heyer Foundation whose funds will provide scholarships for students who

pursue careers in social justice, law, and education in order to fight racism. That is *rahamim*. That is a compassionate response.

-During the hurricane in Florida some people chose to not evacuate. Reporters asked why? The answer most given was: "there have to be people left to clean up after the storm, I am that person." The *din*, the natural law is that storms cause damage; the *rachamim*, the mercy, are the first responders, and those who put their own lives in danger to help others.

-A furniture store in Houston opened its doors to help those made homeless by the flooding.

-This weekend a Beth Shalom employee is on her way home, to Puerto Rico, to see and help her family. She has suitcases full of toiletries, flashlights and compassion donated by this community. Of course, much more *rahamim*, compassion, will be needed there.

This is light coming out of darkness. This is God found in each soul. This is hope. We find joy in these Godly acts. Joy comes in the morning.

In rescue efforts no one asks anyone how they worship, their political party, or if they have a United States passport. The response is, How can we help? And that is morning, dawn and joy. And that is God in us.

It is not just acts of heroism after large events, joy comes when we help others to go from night to morning. Joy came last Christmas morning when a Beth Shalom family spent the morning serving Christmas breakfast and playing the piano for low income folks at a Philadelphia church. Joy came when they went back and cooked and served dinner a few months later.

Night can dissolve into morning and be replaced by hope and joy when we find God in our souls, when we go beyond ourselves and act with *rahamim* – mercy and compassion toward others.

I pray that in the New Year we each discover where the angels hid God in our souls.

I pray that we are God's compassion partners, creatively confronting any bad that occurs from natural disaster or human decrees.

I pray we resist the urge toward despair, and persist in bringing goodness, compassion and generosity into the world by bringing our full selves to serve and help others, then it will be morning, and we will experience joy.

Shana Tovah.

\* See God of Becoming and Relationship, The Dynamic Nature of Process Theology

By Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL