

## **Yom Kippur 5782**

### **What a People who have Survived Can Teach a World Fearful for its Survival**

In his book, "A Letter in the Scroll," Rabbi Sacks asks the question, "Why be Jewish?" He offers many compelling insights about Judaism, which I hope you have had the opportunity to think about and discuss.

I want to ask a slightly different question this morning.

First, a story. When I was the rabbi at Berkeley Hillel, a student of mine told me about her life growing up in Santa Rosa, CA, a town with few Jews. Every year at Hanukkah her mother would come in and make latkes for the class until, after many years, out of great embarrassment, the girl would deny that she was Jewish. She recalled the teacher saying to the class, "Students, we are so fortunate today to have a member of the ancient peoples with us," as if they had dusted off her cobwebs and brought her in straight from the natural history museum where she usually hung out next to the dinosaurs.

This is funny and painful and also true. We have survived for 3,000 years. Remember that Mel Brooks skit about the 2,000 year old man — he thinks saran wrap is the greatest invention -- well, we're him.

Look around. You can go to Egypt and visit the pyramids but the people who built them are long gone. You can visit the Parthenon or read Plato but the ancient Greeks no longer walk the earth. And yet, we are here. I am not sure what constitutes a miracle but I think it is nothing short of miraculous that after 3,000 years, the destruction of our Holy Temple — twice — Crusades, the Inquisition, pogroms, and a Holocaust, we are still here.

And not only have we survived but we have survived well. Our Temple was destroyed and we built a new Judaism centered on home, learning, and prayer. We walked out of the ashes of Auschwitz and rebuilt our national homeland after 2000 years of exile. We came to America where we have built the most successful diaspora community in Jewish history.

But we stand at a moment in world history in which it feels like the survival of humanity is at stake — climate change, a pandemic, fires, floods, drought. I think that more than ever before people are fearful for the survival of the human race..

So, my question this morning is this — what does a survivor people have to teach the world about survival? What are the the features of Judaism that enabled us uniquely to survive when most other civilizations did not?

The first thing I want to suggest is our sense of peoplehood. We are a people much more than we are a religion. We are bound by much more than shared beliefs, customs or culture. We are part of a large family, committed to and responsible for one another

— kol yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh. Such ties are difficult to sever. I suspect that most Jews, even those who are largely cut off from the Jewish community, who never set foot in a synagogue, who have no idea today is Yom Kippur — if you woke them in the middle of the night and asked them who they are, Jew would not be far down the list.

In January of 1991, the first gulf war broke out. I was in Berkeley, California and that night, I attended a peace rally downtown. Someone announced over the loudspeaker that scuds had begun falling on Tel Aviv. The crowd broke out in cheers. I gasped. Suddenly, I didn't know where I was anymore. A minute ago I thought I was standing shoulder to shoulder with others in common cause; now I felt alone and isolated. How could these people cheer when my people were in bomb shelters?

A few days later, in my capacity as Hillel rabbi, I organized a vigil for peace in the center of the UC campus. We did not take a political position for or against the war. We sought instead to gather as Jews, and pray for peace. 200 people showed up at that first vigil and we kept it going weekly throughout the war. I was amazed. I had never seen most of these Jewish students before. But suddenly, confronted with Israel's vulnerability and their own deep discomfort with the discourse around them, they found their way to us. "Collectively these Jewish students had looked in the mirror and said, We are still Jews. And by that they meant more than a private declaration of faith, "religion," in the conventional sense of the word. It meant that they felt part of a people, involved in its fate, implicated in its destiny."

This is why the example par excellence of apostasy in Judaism is the wicked child at the seder table. He doesn't say I don't believe in God or I won't wear tzitzit. He looks at the seder table spread out before him and says, "What is all this to you?" excluding himself from the Jewish people. And his father answers him in kind, "Had you been a slave in Egypt, you would not have been redeemed." The ultimate act of apostasy is not a failure to believe; it is a failure to see oneself as part of the Jewish story.

It is therefore no accident that the Torah was given to the whole Jewish people at Mt Sinai. This is unique in the annals of religion. Most revelations — think Mohammed or Jesus — are entrusted to God's chosen prophet. Although Moses certainly plays a critical role, we all stand at Sinai — all the Israelites and the whole Jewish people including every one of us. In other words, our ties to one another are not just familial; we are collectively entrusted with a shared mission. Torah is given to all of us, it belongs to all of us, and we understand that each of us is necessary for Torah to be whole. As Sacks puts it, each of us is a letter in the scroll.

The second great insight from Judaism is that ours is a tradition rooted in stories. The Torah is not a philosophical treatise. It is a story. Why is this important? First, because stories ignite our imaginations. There are hardly more magic words in the English language than, "Tell me a story," or "Once upon a time." Stories roll around in our minds — they stick with us — they are about truth down here, lived truth, not abstract truth — they allow us to make new connections as we engage with them again and again.

Stories are also intimate, transmitted from parent to child, on a lap, cuddled under a warm blanket. These are not lessons drilled into us in school — they are stories lovingly told by each generation as the next one sits wide-eyed in wonder. Our stories are canonized in ritual. The Seder is a feast whose purpose is the telling of a story, literally the Haggadah. A sukkah, Hanukkah lights tell different stories. Stories embedded in ritual make a unique claim on us.

And our stories are not just stories of the past. We live these stories. The Exodus from Egypt is not only the story of our ancestors. We tell it year in and year out so that we heed its call to justice, its demand to love the stranger, so that we know deeply that God stands against tyranny.

And finally, as Jews we learn to tell redemptive stories. The story we tell transforms our sense of ourselves and lays the ground for future growth. Only because we said, “Next year in Jerusalem,” for 2000 years, only because we nurtured this fantasy as a reality, did we, after our greatest calamity, in fact return to the land of Israel and to Jerusalem. Only because we understood God’s redemption as ongoing did we literally defeat the Soviet Union — we, meaning regular Jews like you and me — and make possible the exodus of millions of Jews and ultimately the fall of the Iron Curtain. Judaism turns a set of beliefs into a story that we live — creation, revelation and redemption are not past, they are present perfect. Every day the world is created anew; God’s voice still sounds from Sinai available to all who listen — shema; and every moment, redemption is possible. We live this story.

Third is the value I spoke of last night and therefore I won’t explore in detail today — that in a divided world, Judaism is a culture that valorizes argument and believes that truth emerges from a plurality of viewpoints. We are a people who know how to argue and believe that a good argument makes for a good outcome. Similarly, we value diversity. In the Torah, humanity is created before the Jewish people — our common humanity precedes our religious differences. Diversity is not a threat to but instead a reflection of divinity.

Fourth. Abraham is called Ivri or Hebrew. Ivri comes from the word iver, one who crossed over. Midrash relates that Abraham is called ivri because he stood on one side of the river while all the rest of the world was on the other. Abraham was an iconoclast, unafraid to challenge the accepted norms of his time.

In other words, Judaism is counter-cultural. Jews throughout history have stubbornly refuted the truths of the world, refusing to bow down to other gods or to eat treif, insisting on their right to be different. This refusal to see the world as others see it seems to be part of our deep DNA — geniuses like Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Franz Kafka and Rosalind Franklin challenged the received wisdom of their time. Perhaps the whole phenomena of Israel as a start up nation, or maybe the very fact of the state of Israel, testify to a Jewish propensity, indeed stubbornness, to see

things differently. These thinkers, dreamers, writers, and nation-builders internalized Abraham's message, his willingness to stand alone on one side of the river.

This means that the Jewish people have refused to accept the world, a world filled with injustice, inequality, chaos and hatred, as it is. The expression, "It is what it is" is antithetical to Judaism. According to the Ishbitzer Rebbe, the worst thing a Jew can be is complacent. When we act in accordance with our tradition, we stand against the received norms and mores of the world in order to transform the world, to make the world more just and more whole.

For most of history, our ancestors, denied admission into the surrounding cultures, clung fiercely to their ways. They stood apart like Abraham and were proud of it. Today we live amidst a welcoming, inviting, and all-encompassing culture, in which we can participate freely as Jews. We don't have to be different and most Jews in America today do not look or live differently than most Americans. We are free not to be Jewish.

Have we lost this ability to stand alone on one side of the river, to cry out that the world is on fire, to rush in to put out that fire? I am worried that we have. The essence of being a Jew is to be counter-cultural. I am worried that we have worked too hard to be like everyone else and that we have become too comfortable fitting in. I believe that to heal the great problems facing our world right now — climate change, pandemic, inequity, injustice — it will require people who stand against the current and say, "Things do not need to be like this." It will require people who can imagine the world otherwise. It will require people who dare to be different. Will we?

How will you make a difference this year? How will you partner with God? How will you call out that the world is on fire and start putting out the fire, fighting injustice, fighting for our fragile planet, fighting for one another? Consider this an invitation to get more involved in civic life this year. How will you use your deep sense of connection to the Jewish people to connect you to others, to a shared sense of humanity and destiny? How will you tell a more inclusive story? A more redemptive one? How will you live the Jewish story in your deeds this year? How will you build your skills to communicate better across difference and through conflict? Will you risk being different, standing against the current? What will you do?

Our social action committee has so many worthy projects that need your support — Abraham's Tent, Chapel on the Green, DESK, Food4Kids, JCARR, the Mitzvah Garden. You can go to the online sign up page or call the office. Either way the chair of the project will get back to you about how you can help. We don't have the star board outside as we usually do because COVID — only online. But we need your help. There is so much good we can do together. What will you do?

True confession. I hate politics. I would rather just study and teach Torah, pastor to all of you, and make B'nai Jacob an active, meaningful, and exciting place. But this moment demands more. I can't teach Torah without living Torah and living Torah means responding to the urgent needs of the world today. It means that we are children of

Abraham, God's covenantal partner in healing this broken world. Anything less is not Torah.

It is so easy to do nothing. For me too. It is human nature to fall back asleep, to watch TV, be caught up in our daily lives and forget all this. That is why we are here today — to wake up — to remember. And to remind one another. If we have survived for 3000 years surely it was for a reason. Is this not the moment to which we were called?

Last month I went to the mikveh with two other rabbis to help convert a young woman and her two children to Judaism. These conversion ceremonies are some of the most meaningful things I do, and whenever I participate in one, I always come home and tell David that all Jews should have the privilege to convert to Judaism. That particular morning the young woman read the statement we ask converts to read, pledging her life to Judaism and the Jewish people, like Ruth before her, with tears streaming down her face. It was clearly so meaningful to her to become part of the Jewish people.

I walked away from there, as I always do, thinking how lucky I am to be born into this religion that others are so moved to embrace. We have all been given a precious treasure. Let's make sure we know enough and do enough to pass it on to the next generation. Not only for us or our own survival but for the survival of this magnificent and vulnerable planet which, I believe, needs our wisdom and our deeds now more than ever.