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Devastation was everywhere. Death loomed in the air. The massive killings, the brutal treatment of the refugees, slaves, and exiles, the destruction of sacred sites – all this hung heavily over the city. Inside the city walls, men and women fought desperately for their lives. Outside the city walls the enormous trenches trapped anyone who tried to escape.

It was a catastrophe.

When the end was near, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai arranged for his students to disguise him as a corpse and smuggle him out of the city walls in a coffin. Once safe he surrendered to Vespasian, the Roman general, who allowed him to establish a small rabbinic academy in the town of Yavneh.

On the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av, in the year 70 CE, the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem, ransacked the city, and torched the great Temple. As the Temple burned, thousands of Jews jumped into the flames. Without the Temple, they believed that Jewish civilization had come to an end.

It's a story not told very often in contemporary Jewish communities, but it was one of the most tragic moments of Jewish history. As we join together this Kol Nidrei, we retell the story of the destruction of Jerusalem and in particular reflect on the actions and teachings of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai – not as a history lesson but as a means for coping with the challenges and struggles in our lives and in the world around us.

Our circumstances are very different from those of Yochanan ben Zakkai. Most of us have not had experiences comparable to living through the destruction of Jerusalem two thousand years ago. But we do grapple with fear, disappointment, anger, and regret. We experience personal tragedy, as well as trauma, throughout our lives. And we observe so much devastation – either closely or from a distance – throughout our world.

We remember Yochanan ben Zakkai more than anything for his ability to overcome despair. As his fellow Jews committed mass suicide all around him, he began the slow, painful work of rebuilding Jewish life. His actions and his teachings can help us consider how to respond to crisis, how to cope with loss, how to adapt to change, and how to be more resilient.

When we think about the state of our world we bring so many emotions here tonight. We bring hopelessness over climate change and despair over the Syrian refugees. We bring outrage over mass incarceration and indignation over continued conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. We bring exasperation over the dismantling of public education and fear over the

chipping away of access to contraception and abortion. We bring resentment over the steep budget cuts to social programs and anger over the treatment of our city's homeless population.

We also bring complex emotions about change in our personal lives. We try to cope with a loved one's illness, with a tragic accident, with the crumbling of a relationship, with the loss of a job. We confront our own mortality, sometimes with great anxiety and stress. We experience regret and anger and frustration. We cannot find our way through.

Some called Yochanan ben Zakkai a coward, and some called him a traitor. Many of his fellow Jews bitterly accused him of abandoning his people when he arranged to be smuggled out of Jerusalem, surrendering to the Romans instead of fighting to the very end.

But Yochanan ben Zakkai knew that to save his people he had to find another way – beyond the killings, beyond the flames, beyond catastrophe. And to this day, no one – apart from Moses and Jeremiah – has carried such extraordinary responsibility for the continuation of Judaism and Jewish civilization. He is one of the most important figures in all of Jewish history because he was able to look beyond the despair of the present to the unknown of the future.

After the destruction of the Temple, Jerusalem was devastated. Some estimate that one million Jews had been killed. The earth was scorched. The great Temple, the center of Jewish life, was in ashes, except for one wall, the Western Wall, which still stands today.

Building a rabbinic academy in Yavneh wasn't just an act of hope. It was a calculated effort to adapt to change – terrible, unwanted change. The Temple had been the center of Jewish life for our ancestors. Without it, Judaism was unimaginable.

But the Rabbis of Yavneh transformed Judaism. Synagogues and houses of study replaced the Temple; now multiple centers of Jewish life could exist. Prayer replaced sacrifice; now everyone could participate directly in their relationship with God. The Rabbis replaced the Priests; now communities would privilege a leader's knowledge and wisdom, not only their family line.

It wasn't that these rabbis were perfect models for coping with loss. In the texts they wrote, what became known as the Mishnah, they barely even mention the destruction of the Temple. Instead they intensely fixated on the rules of Temple worship, as if it were still standing. It was like they created their own fantasy world, living in the past and keeping silent about the present. Maybe they were too traumatized, maybe they were in denial, or maybe they believed the people weren't ready to confront the destruction.

The rabbis weren't perfect, but they did adapt to the overwhelming change around them. They chose life. They found a path leading away from suicide, both the literal ending of one's life and more figuratively a spiritual kind of death – living a life without meaning. They courageously found ways to wake up each day and live in their new, shattered world.

They focused on ritual, on forcing themselves to bless their world even as they coped with loss. Perhaps they believed that through ritual they could sanctify their world, and they could find the strength to make every detail of life holy. Perhaps they believed that by creating structure for themselves and for their communities, they could keep on living, even when their sadness and anger engulfed them.

Adapting to change does not bring with it the promise of something better. Sometimes life never gets better. Good does not always emerge from loss.

We adapt to change because we have no other choice. We adapt to change because if we refuse to adapt, we lose purpose in our lives. We risk either jumping into the flames and or slipping into a spiritual death.

Adapting to change is painfully slow, and it's particularly challenging because we don't know what the future will look like. We don't know where our actions will lead us – personally, communally, or globally. And if we become too attached to the outcome, that attachment will catapult us into the future instead of allowing us to remain present to our lives at this moment.

When confronted with loss, we can try to rebuild our lives and create structure to help us maintain a sense of order. We can foster connections to others and immerse ourselves in community. We can sit quietly and allow ourselves to feel pain, and then give voice to that pain.

Our efforts might not be fruitful. They might end in failure. Our attempts to participate actively in our community or participate in the world around us might not sustain us. Just as we feel we are making some progress in slowly healing from loss, bitterness or overwhelming sadness might consume us all over again.

But we must keep trying and reaching out. We cannot predict where one conversation or action will lead us. We cannot predict how our words or actions will affect someone else.

The very effort of rebuilding our lives changes us. It keeps us engaged in the world around us. It keeps us from turning inward to the point that we dissolve friendships and relationships. It keeps us connected to community when we most need it.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai cautioned against the fervent messianism of his day, for it fueled the fires of extremism, sectarianism, and fanaticism. He used to say, "If there is a sapling in your hand when they say to you, 'The Messiah has come!' finish planting the sapling, and then go and welcome the Messiah" (Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 31b).

He prioritized the mundane work of planting trees over running after a messiah, who was likely a false messiah. He taught that if we keep chasing messiahs, trees will never get planted.

Vain hopes distract us from doing the hard work of the present.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai saw how extremism, sectarianism, and fanaticism engulfed his community. The Romans did destroy Jerusalem and the holy Temple, but Jews were responsible for much of their own suffering and deaths. The Zealots, who were a radicalized faction of Jews, assassinated all moderate Jewish leaders. They executed any Jew who tried to surrender to the Romans. And in a horrifying action, they set fire to their fellow Jews' stockpiles of dry food, which could have lasted for years, to try to compel them to participate in their revolt against the Romans now that they had nothing left to eat.

Trapped in a walled city, they created mass starvation among their people.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai knew that there must be another way. "Plant for the future," he taught. Don't let your anger consume you so that you ignore the slow, difficult work of adapting to your changed world. Don't chase after people who will not sustain you or support you when you are vulnerable. Don't give in to the false messiahs – they claim to liberate you, but they are only poor substitutes for what you really need.

To adapt to change, we have to do the hard work of planting, of sticking a sapling in the ground and nurturing it, giving it water, weeding, tending. This is the ultimate act of hope. We may never see the saplings grow into trees and bear fruit, but in doing this we look beyond our present despair and into the future.

Looking to the future when we cope with loss is really difficult. It's easy to be swallowed by despair which can lead us to either avoid taking responsibility for our actions or to blame ourselves for everything, even events or outcomes that are beyond our control. It takes strength to see ourselves for who we are and to honestly assess our actions. And it takes strength to then confront our wrongdoings or sins. But even in the midst of suffering, Jewish tradition teaches that we have to hold ourselves accountable.

We cannot create and foster healthy relationships, build community, and move past suffering if we hurt others and don't make amends. In adapting to change, we must continue to challenge ourselves to care for others and let go of our anger.

Once Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was walking with his student, Rabbi Joshua, near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua stared at the Temple ruins and said, "What tragedy has befallen us! Our Temple, the place that atoned for the sins of our people through animal sacrifice has been destroyed. Now how will God forgive our sins? How will we ever go on?"

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai answered him, "Do not lament. Even without the sacrifices we do have a means for making atonement. It's by doing *gemilut chasadim*, acts of kindness and compassion towards others" (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 11a).

We can atone for sin – or set things right – even in the midst of suffering. Maybe it's setting things right with God, maybe it's setting things right with loved ones. We atone by reaching out to others and genuinely focusing on their needs.

Rabbi Yochanan counsels us to do acts of kindness when everything we hold dear has been taken away from us. Not only is it a means of setting things right. It's also a way of coping with loss. It's a way of creating meaning in a senseless world. And it's a way of bringing us out of ourselves.

We cultivate compassion because doing these acts of kindness fosters connections with others. It's a way to counter self-pity, self-righteousness, and immobilizing fear. It's a way to make ourselves more resilient and better able to cope with loss.

On this Kol Nidrei, as we confront our challenges and our struggles, let us turn from despair to hope. Let us learn from Yochanan ben Zakkai and creatively adapt to our changing realities. Let us live in the present and not be attached to the unknown outcomes of the future. Let us create structure and ritual, build community, plant saplings, and do acts of kindness for others.

Gemar chatimah tovah – may it be a year of healing for us all.