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There was once a king who ruled his kingdom with justice and wisdom. The goodness and fairness of the king offended those who wished to do evil. Included in this number was a wizard. The wizard hated the king, and he hated the integrity with which the king ruled. The wizard devised a plan to destroy the king, the kingdom and all who were dear to the king. He cursed the harvest. Anyone who ate of the harvest for seven years would be driven insane.

In the court of the king, there was a prophet. This prophet learned of the wizard's curse not in time to stop him, but in time to offer the king a warning. As the harvest was being brought in, the prophet brought the news to the king: "Anyone who eats of this harvest for the next seven years will turn mad.

The king was distressed. What could be done? How could he save his people? He ordered that all the uncontaminated foodstuffs of the kingdom be gathered and measured. He gathered his circle of advisers to ask their advice: "What can we do to protect the kingdom from the curse?"

It was determined that there was just enough food to sustain one person for the seven years of the curse. Only one person could eat of the uncontaminated food and remain sane and sober while the rest of the kingdom sank into madness. But who? Whom would the king trust with this impossible mission? And what could one sane person do in a kingdom of the mad?

The king turned to his trusted friend the prophet, "You should be the one," he charged. "You shall be given the uncontaminated food, enough for the seven years of the curse. You shall eat. And while all the rest of us sink into madness, you shall be the one who remains sane, sober and rational."

But, Your Majesty, what can one man do? What can one sane man do in a kingdom of the mad?

The king replied, "You cannot keep us from our madness, but you must remind us that we are mad. Ride through the kingdom, and proclaim, aloud, 'My brothers and sisters, remember the curse. Remember you are mad!'"

It was a daunting and lonely responsibility. But the prophet so loved the king he accepted the task. And so it came to be that all in the kingdom ate of the cursed harvest. And all of them became insane. In their speech and dress and behavior, they were quite

mad. It was the daily task of the loyal prophet to ride through the kingdom as he had been charged, proclaiming: My brothers and sisters, remember the curse! Remember that you are mad!

One day during the years of the curse, as he rode about the kingdom proclaiming his truth, one of the citizens of the kingdom looked up at him with curiosity. "If it is true, my brother, that we are mad because of the curse and you are the only sane one among us, why do you proclaim it? What good will it do?" He said, "If we are mad, how will your proclamation change anything? Isn't this your own madness?"

A thoughtful question from a madman, thought the prophet. Indeed, what good does it do? Was this task just his own madness? Had the curse affected him as well?

He declared: "I proclaim this truth out of loyalty to my king, who charged me to do so. I proclaim this so that you might stop a moment before you act and perhaps wonder if your act derives not from any reason but from the curse's madness. You may be mad, but perhaps this once you will not choose to behave in the way of the insane. Perhaps this once you will choose the alternative and behave in a manner that is reasoned, just and wise." And then the prophet sighed, thinking of all the mad behavior he had witnessed these many years. He thought of all the senseless brutality, the mindless cruelty, the self-destructive acts he had witnessed. He realized that his aspiration was probably a vain hope. Perhaps the madman was right. Perhaps he was as mad as the rest.

Then he thought again and he declared: "No, if nothing else succeeds, this I know. By fulfilling my charge, by never ceasing to proclaim your insanity, by warning you and begging you to behave in a manner more reasoned and more humane, this I am certain I shall achieve: I shall remain sane. More than the food I eat, this is my way to remain sane and sensible."

"Very well, my brother," replied the thoughtful madman, "fulfill your charge and offer your proclamation. Perhaps one day soon we will awaken from this curse and join you on your mission."

(*"The Cursed Harvest"* retold by Edward M. Feinstein in *Capturing the Moon: Classic and Modern Jewish Tales*, Pg.93-95.)

As we consider the year that has passed, as we examine the state of our world, our nation, and our city, as we look around us or pick up a newspaper, we are living in a world that feels like it has gone insane. We witnessed a devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico which spewed nearly 5 million barrels of oil into the ocean, causing disastrous long-term environmental and economic effects. Yet instead of this being a profound wake-up call to our nation, we continue to drill, dump, and pollute. In the face of

floods, fires, hurricanes, droughts, melting glaciers, and rising temperatures we ignore the signs of global warming and continue down a risky, self-destructive path.

In Arizona we witnessed the passage of the broadest and strictest immigration measure in generations designed to identify, prosecute, and deport undocumented immigrants. Making the failure to carry immigration documents a crime and giving the police broad power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally, it invites harassment and discrimination of all immigrants regardless of their citizenship status, and it has already led to a spike in reports of employers failing to pay immigrant workers their earned wages.

On the war front, while the United States has recently ended its war in Iraq, the Iraqi people still suffer from rising violence, sectarian divisions, no stable government, minimal reconstruction, and corruption. One hundred thousand civilians were killed and millions have been displaced. Our nation has spent three-quarters of a trillion dollars on the war, and we will likely continue to spend huge sums. And in spite of a lack of popular support for the war in Afghanistan, the government spends \$100 billion a year on this war, more than the cost of the administration's health care plan.

While we spend this money on war, our economy at home suffers. Jobs are scarce and budget cuts have been devastating to schools and social services. With declining resources and increased need, we see increased illness, hunger, homelessness, and domestic violence. The poverty rate rose sharply in the last year; 44 million people now live in poverty, and the sharpest rise has been for children: one in five under the age of 18 live in poverty.

In the face of such suffering and such tremendous waste of precious resources, how could we not feel powerless? How could we not, in some way, see ourselves as the prophet, reflecting on all "the senseless brutality, the mindless cruelty, the self-destructive acts" that we witness. Unlike the traditional concept of a prophet, we do not have any God-given insights to proclaim, but we feel the suffering and anguish around us and our hearts open with compassion. We see such tremendous waste, such disregard for human life, such callousness towards people we care about and towards people we do not even know.

We want to tell others that they are mad. How can they call for more drilling, more laws that destroy immigrant families, more war? How can they fight against access to health care for all, how can they argue for cuts to schools and social services when the need is so great?

And yet we wonder if in fact we are the ones who are mad. Everything around us seems to be crumbling. What good could one lone voice do? What good could our tiny actions ever accomplish?

These questions weigh heavily on our hearts, but we come here over these High Holy Days to receive a charge of our own: to speak the truth even when it seems that no one is listening, to continue to act justly and compassionately even as so many around us seem to be condoning, benefiting from, or participating in such stark apathy, greed, dishonesty, recklessness, and vengeance. We do these small acts because they matter – they matter to others and they matter to us.

We are here to remind ourselves and each other that small acts of justice and compassion, while seeming insignificant and inconsequential, do have an effect – on slowly, painfully making the world a little bit less insane, and by reminding ourselves, in the words of our story’s prophet, that by speaking up we shall remain sane and sensible.

We are here to remind ourselves and each other that we should work from a place of passion, not judging ourselves or others, but tapping into what we really care about, experimenting with community organizations and projects that mean something to us, joining with friends, colleagues, or community members, and learning from others around us. We come together to ask questions, educate ourselves, and think critically all while keeping open minds and open hearts.

We are here to remind ourselves and each other that we have to take responsibility for our individual actions and for the actions of our community and society at large. Unlike in our story, our problems were not caused by the curse of an evil wizard. Our problems were caused by all of us. We each bear some responsibility for the state of the world in which we live. We commit to doing our share, to remembering that, in the words of Rabbi Tarfon, “It is not up to us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.”

We are here to remind ourselves and each other that change happens when we join together, when we don’t see ourselves as lone prophets but rather as a community of concerned individuals who care deeply enough about the future of our world to challenge the insanity around us and to act – deliberately, thoughtfully, and faithfully – for when we do act, we change ourselves – making us more compassionate in the face of suffering, more cognizant of our own role in perpetuating injustice, more committed to recognizing the needs of others.

We are here to remind ourselves and each other that this is not an easy task, that the road ahead is daunting and lonely, but it is also filled with new opportunities and unseen possibilities. May this be a year of hopefulness, of learning, of joining together, and of speaking up so that we can remain sane and sensible.

Gmar chatimah tovah – May we all be sealed for a good year.