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What We Should Do When We Are Drowning in Troubles

Living through Covid feels like living in a cave. We are cut off, isolated and lonely. We are suffering emotionally, physically, economically and spiritually. Many people, from members in our community to Michelle Obama have commented that they are wrestling with depression. We have lost our jobs, our health, our vitality, our get up and go, because there is honestly, nowhere to go.

I had planned on visiting my mother in Portland, Oregon, but chose not to fly there due to Covid. She and her husband, Byron were hoping to fly here for the High Holy Days, but won’t be coming. With tears in her eyes she worries that she may never come east again to visit and see her family. And, this past May, Laurie’s mother, Audree passed away from Covid at the Abramson Center. What made matters worse is that we were unable to visit with her, comfort her or even say goodbye to her. All we had was a Facebook conversation from time to time.

These have been horrible times. We are dying, suffering, losing work, running deficits, fighting depression, closing businesses. And worse, we see the streets of many American cities overflowing with rage, violence and death. So what do we do?

Covid has struck people differently. Not everyone, I know is experiencing this pandemic the same way.

For some people—I don’t know why—the journey is smooth.
For others—I don’t know why—the journey is rough.
For some—I don’t know why—the virus takes a person’s life.
For others—I don’t know why—the virus has no impact at all. This is a disease with no clear symptoms, but the effects on our psyche are all too clear.

In searching for wisdom to share with you about Covid and our response, I found an amazing story from the Talmud, tractate shabbat about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. As it turned out Shimon bar Yochai disparaged a Roman emperor in the first century and was sentenced to death by a tribunal. He and his son went and hid in a school house briefly and then in a cave for twelve years, waiting for the emperor to die so the decree would be rescinded. They made a life for themselves in the cave. The text tells us
He (R. Shimon) went with his son and hid in a cave. A miracle happened - a carob tree and a spring of water were created for them. All day they sat and studied, and when the time came to pray they covered [their heads] and prayed.

Finally, after twelve years, Elijah the prophet comes to the opening of the cave to tell Yochai that the emperor had died and the decree was annulled.” So they went out and immediately saw men plowing and sowing. R. Shimon was enraged. He said, “They forsake eternal life as we have done and busy themselves with such meaningless things as food!” So, with some sort of mythical power, he burned them up with his gaze. The text tells us, “Every place to which he turned his eyes was immediately burned to a cinder.” A heavenly voice (bat kol) came out and said to the Rabbi “Did you come out of your cave only to destroy my world? Go back to your cave!”

So they returned. After another twelve months, they came out again, this time with hope, kindness and forbearance. The text tells us, “Wherever [his son] R. Elazar smote – R. Shimon healed...” Later, his colleagues see the toll that his isolation had brought on him. His body and character were weakened. But he was wiser. R. Shimon said to a colleague, “Blessed are you that you see me so, for you can tell just how much I learned in my isolation.”

Before his isolation, he had some answers, but now he had even more.

We are like Yochai. We were quarantined. The curve flattened and we came out. Then, covid cases started to rise and now we are back in our caves. But Like Shimon Bar Yochai, I believe that we will come out wiser.

Here is what I know from my time in the cave. Being good, being nice, being ‘frum’ (religious), being just, going to ‘shul’ (synagogue), doing good deeds, working for Israel, praying devoutly or keeping kosher, donating to the synagogue’s tzedakah funds....all of these things are good and praiseworthy and should be done, but none of these is any guarantee that catastrophe and calamity won’t happen to us.

Shimon was pious. And yet look at all the troubles he had. He was alone, dejected, hunted.

I know this. Religion is not an umbrella and it is not an insurance policy against distress. That is not its purpose. If it were, we would all be religious - not out of piety, but out of prudence.

Covid has tested us as no other experience. It kicks out from under us the social stilts on which we frequently stand, and rubs off the veneer we habitually wear. Covid has held up a mirror for us to see ourselves more clearly. For in our fearful encounter with it, we are compelled to see who and what we truly are. We may think of ourselves as strong and independent, but we are oh so, vulnerable.

Allow me, to share with you a few precious insights from this story.
Yochai was enraged following his quarantine. He could not get a handle on why life had treated him so unfairly. At first, he couldn’t stop his anger from destroying those around him. He literally burned everything up. So God says, go back in the cave and think. Look at your life and that of others with new eyes, ones that won’t burn things up. In other words, look at our problems WITH CLEAR AND OPEN EYES. Perspective is everything. We need to understand that there are situations that we can solve, and there are also situations that we cannot. I have met so many people who when confronted by trouble, respond with despair. They cannot see a way out of it. I have also been fortunate enough to meet people who have a fighting spirit, and confront the solvable problems with resolve. Remember the serenity prayer? “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the strength to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

When we can effect a change, let us put our shoulder to the wheel. Let us also accept with resolution that not all problems can be solved. We just have to endure so that our pain softens. Perspective is essential, for to confuse what we can change with what we cannot, only leads to more pain and suffering.

Second, Shimon Bar Yochai found support from his son. In times of trouble, we must find strength from one another. I doubt that Shimon would have survived without companionship in that cave for twelve years. We too need to remember that we are not alone. There are people that care for us and need our care in return. It might be a wife or a husband. It could be a friend, or it might even be a child. But during this time of cave dwelling, make sure that you stay connected. We can turn to someone else, someone who will listen patiently and caringly to our problems, someone who will hear us out.

One of the greatest Jewish theologians, Franz Rosenzweig believed that none of us really stand on solid ground. Each of us are actually held up by our neighbors’ hands. Who knows? Our family may have a suggestion to offer. Our families may be able to lead us to someone who can help - perhaps to a doctor, a lawyer, a businessperson or some wise individual. And even if he or she can’t, just being listened to will do some good. The Talmud teaches, “When two students listen patiently to one another.....the Holy One listens to them too; and if they do not, they cause the Shekinah, the indwelling presence of God to depart from Israel.” Concealed griefs are the most consuming, secret maladies are the most fatal.

Third, Shimon was furious with his circumstances. He was angry at being so isolated, that he lashed out. We do that, don’t we? So what does God say? God sends him back into the cave. I think this was God’s way of saying, “you can endure even more....get a hold of yourself.”
Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, “When you get in a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as if you could not hold on a minute longer, never give up, for that’s just the place and time when the tide will turn.”

I met a Jew, a member of my first shul, who told me of a terrible night at Auschwitz. I have never forgotten his story. It is the tale, of a typical night of torture. The inmates were forced to stand, in thin tattered clothing, for a torturous 36 hours at attention in the middle of the winter. Anyone that fell to the ground would be immediately shot. People’s limbs began to freeze, and with little strength left, inmates began to waver. To prevent anyone from being killed, hands were quietly and surreptitiously stretched out to support the weak. Like electricity the word, “Aushalten” “Hold on,” coursed up and down the ranks. This desperate cry gave the weak the strength to endure. It was as if God’s hands were supporting them.

My friends, we can always hold on a little bit longer. And if you do, you never can tell when the winds will shift and the sun will come out. Never give up. Never give up. Never give up.

Finally, we can turn to our heritage for help. I don’t believe that God will solve our problems for us, but I do believe that a faith in God can give us the strength to confront our tzorosis. When we turn to our traditions, we tap into resources that the nonbeliever cannot avail. Our true personality is like a larger, submerged section of the iceberg that never appears above the surface. There is a child, mystic, poet, ethicist, and prophet in all of us. Too often, that side of us is either ignored or forgotten by the material and competitive world of ours. Our faith, however, through worship elicits the healing side our personalities. Prayer enables us to reach deep into the core of our spirits, a core that is untouched by normal experience, and brings to our consciousness the mystic, the beautiful, the just, the aesthetic, the healing and the affectionate capacities that reside deep within us. We will find emotional support in our prayer, we will discover a connectedness to others and to God in our prayer, we will find a new perspective which empowers and strengthens us to fight on one more day. The one who rises from prayer a stronger person, their prayers have been answered. Don’t forget to pray.

These, then, are the four things we can do when we find ourselves in a cave. We can look at our problems and see if there is anything we can do about them. We can turn to a friend for help. We can hang in a little bit longer. And we can turn to our heritage.

One last lesson from our story. At the conclusion of the story of Shimon Bar Yochai and the cave, we find a wonderful statement. He says,

אמר:좋아요:המערס Lauderdale נלצי לאזון:המערס:

“Since a miracle occurred for me, I will go and fix something.” We are here. We may not be together. But we are here. And that is a wondrous thing. Shimon turned from his pain and his suffering and saw
not just his travails but the miracle of his survival and he expressed gratitude for that by helping another. He chose not to turn inward and focus on his own path, but rather, like a true sage, he turned to lift up another. As we find ourselves still in the cave, sort of speak, let us resolve to lift up the fallen, heal the sick, comfort the bereaved and find the good. And where things are broken, may we do one simple thing; fix them.

Amen.