

Gesher Tzar Me'od – A Very Narrow Bridge

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Shana tova! This year has truly been surreal. It has tested us as individuals, as a community and as a nation. As a rabbi, I have to say that it was much easier to study the Bible when it didn't feel like it was ripped from the headlines.

Between Covid deaths and lock-downs, devastating wild fires and hurricanes, a rise in racism and anti-Semitism, national social upheaval, wide-spread protests, businesses downsizing or closing, and so many of us and our kids having to stay at home nonstop for months, I've lost track of how many plagues were inflicted on us this year.

However, one of the blessings of Rosh HaShanah is that it reminds us that the world is in a constant state of renewal, an endless cycle of death and rebirth. Each year we are given the opportunity to begin again, and to try to do it better this time. Not only are we given the opportunity to atone for our past mistakes, but we can try again to become the people we would like to be, as individuals, and as a community.

Judaism is an optimistic religion for a pragmatic people living in a troubled world. Our religion reminds us that there is always the possibility of a better future, but only if we are willing to work to make that future a reality.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was one of the great sages who was also one of the architects of the Judaism that we practice today. He lived during one of the most traumatic periods of Jewish history, the destruction of the 2nd Temple, and our exile from Jerusalem.

There is a story told about him in the midrash. It is written that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught that "If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, stay and finish the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 31b). "

What is meant by this is that when the Messiah comes there is supposed to be an age of peace, where all people get along, and war, hatred and conflict will cease to exist. Which makes it understandable why throughout the millennia many have come forward to claim to be the savior of humanity and the Jewish people, and why many others have eagerly followed them. But Rabbi Yochanan reminds us to be skeptical of quick fixes, miracles, and charlatans, we shouldn't be distracted by the hype, but rather, we must continue to do the work at hand that is needed to invest in a better future. As Jews, even as we pray for a messianic era, we must continue to roll up our sleeves and do the work that is needed to make that age of peace and prosperity possible.

More than ever this year I have seen a particular Jewish value be in conflict with what appears to be an increasingly American value. Every day it feels like we are hearing stories about people

declaring that their personal freedom is more important to them than a sense of communal responsibility.

This idea however of unlimited, unchecked, personal autonomy is not considered a blessing in Judaism, but a curse. Rabbi Eliyahu ha-Kohen wrote in the Shevat Mussar in the late 1600s “Woe to the person who says ‘Shalom Alechim – or - Peace be upon thy soul!’ And does not join the community in its hour of trouble.” In other words, heaven help you if you abandon your community when you are actually needed.

When I speak to the youth in our congregation about becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, an adult in our community, they often look panicked. Because in America “being an adult” or “adulting” as some call it nowadays, is about being responsible for yourself, paying your bills, getting a job, being on your own and taking care of yourself.

But this is not what is meant by being a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Being an adult in the Jewish community means acknowledging that you now have a responsibility for yourself in a very different way. It means that the community recognizes that you now know the difference between right and wrong, that you are capable of being held accountable for your actions, and that you are not responsible enough to step up and be of service to your community.

In our morning liturgy there is a passage from the Mishna that gives us concrete examples of what it means to be B'nai Mitzvah, or an adult member of our community:

Eilu devarim she-ain la-hem shiur...

These are the obligations without measure,
whose reward too is without measure,
of which a person enjoys the fruit of this world,
while the principal remains in the world to come. They are:
honoring ones' s parents,
engaging in deeds of compassion,
arriving early for study, morning and evening,
dealing graciously with guests,
visiting the sick,
providing for the wedding couple,
accompanying the dead for burial,
being devoted in prayer,
and making peace among people.

And the study of Torah is equal to them all (because it leads to them all).

-Shabbat 127a

Simply put, to be an adult in our community means recognizing that what we do, or don't do, has an impact on others.

And the line “these are the obligations without measure, whose reward too is without measure” means these acts of being of service to others are invaluable, and impossible to be repaid. But we are still expected to do these things, not because we should expect to receive any benefit from them, but because others will. This concept is what has enabled the Jewish people to exist living in exile and being subjected to persecution for almost 2000 years, the simple idea that our community depends on each of us looking out for each other, and not just ourselves.

This teaching is as least as old as Hillel, and it is part of the world view that has shaped and defined the Judaism that we practice to this day.

This understanding of interconnectedness and communal responsibility that this prayer expresses is at the core of what it means to be a Jew.

This is why we have had some variation of a Hebrew Free Loan Society, a Jewish Family Service and Jewish Federation, in nearly every Jewish community throughout the Diaspora.

It's why HIAS - the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helps immigrants and refugees whether or not they are Jewish, in the United States and everywhere else they are needed. It's why we hear so many Jewish names as donors on PBS programs and see similar names on libraries, hospitals, museums and schools, and wherever there is a donor wall.

It's why so many Jews go into professions that are about helping others, like social work, education, medicine and government. It's why we put so much value on being a devoted parent or a loving child, a good partner and loyal friend. Because being in relationship with others, making life better for others, matters. In order to repair the world, we begin with the people who are all around us, our family, our community, and all who are in need.

It's why so many of us grew up with those little green, or blue and white, tzedakah boxes, or twinned with a Refusnik when we became Bar and Bat Mitzvah, it's why we sponsor onegs and buy trees to celebrate someone else's life cycle event, it's why synagogues subsidize the real cost of Religious School educations, and why B'nai Israel never turns someone away from membership because they can't afford it.

It's because in Judaism, to be a responsible member of society means recognizing that you don't live in this world by yourself. And that everyone has a responsibility to do their share to make things better for everyone else, whether that means celebrating with the community in joyous times, mourning with the community in difficult times, or supporting it any way you can in the times in between.

And when I say everyone, I mean everyone. Not just the people we know, like or agree with, but everyone. We now live in a global shtetl, and our behavior should reflect that.

I have been so proud of our congregation over these last six months. So many people stepped forward to ask what they could do to help others.

We had B'nai Mitzvah kids who dropped off cookies for a couple who were feeling lonely because they were quarantined with a new born and their family was far away. One of our students made lovely wall art with inspirational messages and dropped them off at the homes of people in high risk groups. There were also kids who made care packages for people who work in hospitals, and others who prepared meals for people who are homeless.

We had congregants making masks and giving them away for free. We had people calling in on our elderly and home bound congregants to make sure they were ok and see if they needed anything.

We've had members who are first responders, medical professionals and essential workers doing not only what their job demands, but volunteering on top of it, so as to keep our country going throughout the pandemic.

And there were others who, while properly masked and social distancing, still went out onto the streets in June to show solidarity with our black brothers and sisters, because they felt that staying silent at a time of injustice was even more dangerous and toxic to our society than the virus.

For the last six months I have been hearing inspiring stories of our members reaching out to others to provide emotional support or material help.

And I heard from people who said how much it meant to them to know that B'nai Israel was there for them, even if when they couldn't come to us.

It is as Rabbi Yerucham of Mir once said “the seismograph has taught us that a tremor in any part of the world can be felt by a sufficiently sensitive instrument everywhere else in the world. The same is true of a person’s deeds. One should not think that their actions do not affect others. Everything one does in some way affects everyone else in the world.”¹

And if we didn’t believe that before the pandemic, we certainly know that now.

When we strengthen even one individual, then that individual can then help their family, and that family can then help others in their community, and that community can then share its resources with other communities, and so on, until the whole world is made stronger.

But sadly, the same is true in the negative. When we tear down one person, or remove one person from society because of death or incarceration, or exile, not only do they suffer, but their

¹ Rabbi Yerucham of Mir as quoted in “Smiling Each Day” by Rabbi Avraham Twerski

family suffers as well, and that also has an impact on their community, and their town, and so on.

We atone for our sins in the collective at the High Holidays, because we understand that not only are we responsible for what we ourselves do, but when we see something that is wrong, and do nothing, then we become responsible for that as well. As it's written in Leviticus 19:17, "you shall reason with your neighbor, and not allow sin on his account." This means when we fail to call our fellow community members to account for *their* wrongdoings, we become guilty by association. Because in Judaism, being an adult, means we are responsible not only for our own actions, but also the actions of our fellow community members.

Eilu devarim is supposed to be a daily mantra to remind us to direct our energy and intentions not only towards our own personal needs, but also to be aware of, and respond to, the needs of others. Our ancestors understood all too well that we are stronger both as individuals and as a community when we are all looking out for each other.

Imagine living in a world where everyone not only cared about what happens to someone else, but also acted accordingly. In the words of the great American singer-songwriter, Sam Cooke, "what a wonderful world it would be."

For the next 10 days we as a community will reflect on the last year. While at home we are supposed to think about the choices we have made as individuals, but when we come together to pray, we will atone for the choices our society has made. But these are not two separate things. As Reb Yitzchak Levi Satanov observed "The nature of the community is but the sum-total of what there is in the individuals."

We may think that we alone can not change the world, and that is true. But when we stop seeing ourselves as alone, and understand that we are all connected, then change can occur, both within us, and around us.

Like a lot of people, after Chadwick Boseman died last month, I watched the Black Panther movie again. But after months of experiencing the consequences of a global pandemic, I was affected by the last scene more profoundly than I had been before.

In T'Challa's speech in the post credit scene of the Black Panther movie, where he addresses a UN like assembly, he says that his people "...will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this Earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe."

The prayer Eilu Devarim gives us a guide for how to build bridges between one person and another, it begins at home and extends into our community, and even the world.

As the Rabbis taught, we should:

“Honor ones’s parents,
engage in deeds of compassion,
arrive early for study, morning and evening,
deal graciously with guests,
visit the sick,
provide for the wedding couple,
accompany the dead for burial,
be devoted in prayer,
and make peace among people.”

And if we’re not sure how to do these things, then study Torah, because it will teach us how.

After all of these many hundreds of years, this is still good advice to live by. But in these strange times we are living in, I decided to add an addendum to this prayer for the year 2020, or to be more accurate, the year 5781. It is a way for us to focus each day on the small things we can do to make an important difference, and help us move forward and build stronger bridges between each of us:

These are the things that are never ending, of which a person may benefit from now, but the blessing will be felt for generations to come...

Wear a mask, and wash your hands so as to protect others
from getting sick,
support local business owners and shop locally,
provide assistance to those who are hungry or homeless,
call those who are in high risk groups, and see if they need help,
reach out to your parents, grandparents and the elderly,
so that they feel less isolated,
be kind, patient and forgiving with friends and strangers,
online and in person,
get to know people who are different than you,
let your friends from vulnerable communities know
that you stand with them,
lesson your ecological footprint and protect the earth so that
it will still be inhabitable for humans long after we are gone,
support your local paper, schools, libraries and museums,
because to be informed and educated should not be just for
those who can afford it, and
vote, and help other’s vote, because it’s your civic duty and moral responsibility to
care about what happens locally, nationally and globally.

And if you don't know where to start, start by being a mensch, a decent human being. Because being a mensch is equal to them all, because it leads to them all.