

A CRACK OR A ROSE?
Rabbi Mona Alfi
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The first several times when I sat down and tried to write this sermon, I couldn't. So I called the Cantor and said "I am a cracked and empty vessel, with nothing left to give." She said "that's great! That's how you should begin your sermon!" I laughed. And she said "No! Seriously! Start with that. Because that's how a lot of us are feeling these days."

This is not where I thought we would be this year. So many of the things that troubled my soul last year are the same things that are getting to me this year.

And it's not just that there seems to be no end to the pandemic. It's also the problems that the pandemic has highlighted such as economic inequality, particularly in the form of homelessness and food insecurity, and even who is getting sick.

While I know that compared to the vast majority of the world, I got off pretty easy this last year, it was still not an easy year for me emotionally. I am a planner. For instance, I had been planning my son's Bar Mitzvah from the time he was born, and arguing with Glenn about it before we even got married.

So in the 10 months preceding my youngest being called to the Torah, and everything kept changing, on a weekly basis, I had to practice the art of letting go. And up until the month before his Bar Mitzvah, I did a pretty good job of it.

But then things started getting really crazy.

In the 3 weeks prior to his becoming a Bar Mitzvah we went from thinking that a few of his aunts, uncles and cousins could join us in the chapel, to Northern California being in home confinement again.

And then after the January 6 insurrection in DC, we had to take the Torahs out of the temple for safe keeping because of threats of violence against the Jewish community.

And then because the FBI told us of threats of violence against the Jewish community we thought his Bar Mitzvah was going to have to be done via zoom, from our kitchen table, because we weren't sure if it would be safe to be at the temple in the days following the Presidential inauguration.

Let me tell you, worldwide pandemics, threats of civil war, or possible outbreaks of violence in Sacramento had NOT been part of ANY of my visions of what my son's Bar Mitzvah would look like.

So his Bar Mitzvah was not exactly what I had imagined it to be. But it was just as joyous and amazing. Was our family and community in the room with us? No, but we could see their smiles and their pride on the television screen. And even loved ones who lived across the US and other countries were able to join us.

Did we get to have a big luncheon where we could hug everyone? No, but we had fun being able to connect with people during the drive through oneg in the parking lot, and to feel their love and support.

And at the end of the day, Glenn and I were beaming with pride because our son had become a Bar Mitzvah, in our congregation, and he was surrounded by our family and our community.

The Jewish people's greatest strength has always been our ability to adapt and re-envision how we do things. To draw upon our core values and traditions and find a new way to live by them in even the most difficult and trying of times.

In 2019, our family went to the Terezin concentration camp in the Czech Republic. It was a sobering thing to walk through this ghost town of terror where 33,000 Jews had died, and 88,000 had been transported to their death in Auschwitz. But there was one room there that took my breath away and moved me like nothing else.

In 1997 after floods had seriously damaged the region, one of the private homes inside of Terezin was going through some remodeling, and what was discovered there was a Hidden Synagogue created during the Holocaust.

Celebrating and observing Judaism in Tereinstadt was strictly forbidden. However, a number of rabbis were able to take over a storeroom in the back of one of the homes there and create a secret synagogue where Jews could gather for a daily minyan and Shabbat.

But the rabbis didn't leave this space as a simple storeroom. No. They beautified it with spectacular murals inscribed with Jewish symbols and verses from the Bible.¹ They transformed it into a truly sacred space.

I was overcome by emotion at the idea that in the middle of that horrific nightmare, in a modest little room, they could create such hope, beauty and comfort for those who dared to enter it, knowing that the simple act of participating in a minyan meant risking their lives.

But it was even more than that that moved me. It was about how these rabbis found a way to stay true to their beliefs, and to serve their community, even if it was not in way that they had been taught in rabbinical school.

¹ <http://www.heritageabroad.gov/details-page-project/articleid/12/terezin-s-hidden-synagogue>

Rashi teaches us that the Torah compares humans to trees because, like humans, trees have the power to grow.

But what type of tree are we to be? The type that bends and sways when the winds start to blow, or one that stands inflexible in a storm? The tree that can bend and sway is the tree that will survive. The one that is inflexible will ultimately snap or be uprooted.

Judaism and Jewish history has taught us the importance of being able to adapt in harsh environments, and the necessity to either find or create joy even in the darkest of times. Three words have been key to my getting through this last year: pivot, perspective and priorities.

We have to be flexible enough so that we don't break under the ongoing pressures and uncertainty of pandemic life. We need to be able to look beyond the moment and continue to plan for the future we still hope for, and we must make sure that our values continue to guide our daily actions.

At the beginning of the pandemic Cantor and I joked that we had been preparing for this moment our entire lives.

In truth, to be raised in the Jewish community is to be painfully aware that the world is full of harsh surprises, and that it is often when and where you least expect it, that a crisis will arise. But the one thing most of us are certain of is that in our lifetime there will be a major crisis. It's why many of us keep our passports current, along with a mental list of where we could go if we had to leave it a hurry.

This mindset is both a blessing and a curse. A curse, because it creates a lot of anxiety in many of us. And a blessing, because that mindset is what saved many of our ancestors, and enables us to be here today.

During this year – synagogue leadership had to look at piquach nefesh and tikkun olam not just as philosophical ideals, but as practical guideposts to help us get through a tumultuous and traumatizing time.

Many in our congregation came to understand through new eyes the role that the temple and Judaism plays in our lives as a touchstone and source of comfort and safety, and how it can be the center of our community even when we can't gather together here.

So often when we talk in Judaism about repairing what is broken, we speak of tikkun olam – repairing the world. But before we can repair the world we must engage in tikkun atzmi – repairing ourselves.

This last year and half has taken a toll on all of us, physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

While being out in nature and seeing the vastness and grandeur of our world can uplift our spirits, spending too much time staring at a screen can make the world feel small, lonely and even terrifying. And for many of us, this last year has paralyzed us, or made us fearful, or simply overwhelmed.

But at times, looking into those small screens also gave us a lifeline, enabling us to mourn with loved ones at a funeral that was across the country. For some people with disabilities it made accessing education or work easier than it had been before. Even shabbat services became more consistently well attended than ever because for people who were home bound or worked late on Friday nights before the pandemic, they could suddenly attend services because we were right in their homes with them. And for my family, celebrating our son's Bar Mitzvah on zoom enabled loved ones who even before Covid, would not have been able to be here in person, give us the gift of seeing their smiles up close on that joyous day.

This last year and a half has reminded us repeatedly about how little we have control over. But it's also reminded us of what we can control.

We can't control how others treat us, but we can control how we treat others.

We can't control the things that upset us, but we can control how we respond to them.

We can't repair the entire world, but we can try to repair the part of the world that we live in, beginning with ourselves.

Judaism teaches us that life is not meant to be lived passively, but rather we must take responsibility for our choices, our actions and our reactions.

The Maggid of Dubno told a story about a king who owned the most beautiful diamond in the world. Every night the king would carefully take the gem from its case to look at it and admire it.

But one night the diamond slipped from his hands and fell to the floor. The king quickly snatched it up, but when he examined the stone, he saw right away that there was now a thin crack running down its length, right down the middle. His diamond was ruined.

In a panic, the king called every jeweler in his realm. But each expert responded that once there's a crack in a diamond, there's no way to fix it. The desperate king sent out word that anyone who could repair his broken diamond would be richly rewarded.

A few days later, a jeweler from a distant province arrived at the palace. After examining the diamond, he promised the king he would fix everything, not to worry. He took the diamond and

promised to return with it in a few months.

The king was inconsolable and couldn't wait to see his diamond as good as new. When the day arrived, the jeweler presented a beautiful box. The king shook with excitement and opened it quickly. But when the king looked inside, his face turned red and he shook with fury. The same thin crack still ran down the center of his precious diamond. "What have you done! Nothing! he screamed. "You promised you would fix it!"

"Please, your majesty, wait!" said the old man. "Just turn the stone over." And when the king did so, he saw the jeweler had carved the petals of a flower at the top of the diamond. So now the crack running through the stone appeared to be the stem of a flower, and the diamond was more beautiful and precious than ever.² Because now it was unlike any other stone.

While each of us may come into this world unblemished, the reality is that life will leave it's mark on all of us.

When I began to write this sermon, not only was I fixated on the crack in the diamond I call my life, I began to internalize it. The Cantor helped me regain my perspective.

I know that this can sound pollyannish, but to paraphrase a favorite teaching of mine from our prayerbook "obtaining perspective may not bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city. But proper perspective can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."³

The Jewish people have sustained many tragedies and crises throughout our history. Think about it, Purim is about attempted genocide. Passover is about attempted genocide. Tish B'Av while it did not start out about genocide, it is about 2 forced exiles, and then later, with the Inquisition, another attempted genocide. Chanukah, a minor holiday, not about genocide, but is about the attempted destruction of Judaism as a civilization. And I don't even need to remind you that the 19th and 20th centuries were pretty hard on the Jewish people.

In other words, our history has taught us to be prepared for the worst, but to never lose our perspective, or our sense of humor. In fact our survival, both collectively and individually, depends on it.

So the question is this. Which do we want to see when we look at our lives? The crack? Or the rose? Do we see those difficulties in our life as unfixable? Or as a of yet unfulfilled blessing? Do

² Adapted from the telling by Rabbi Marc J. Margolis in his sermon "CRACKS IN THE DIAMOND" at West End Synagogue Erev Yom Kippur 5777/2016

³ Adapted from a reading on p. 75, Mishkan Tefila, by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman

we want to be “just like new”? Or do we want to see how those difficult times in our life can transform us into someone more resilient than we were before?

The choice is ours to make.