

Be Strong and Remember the Promise – Yom Kippur 5782

Rabbi Michael Safra

B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, MD

Mi she-lo ra-ah beit ha-mikdash b'vinyano lo ra-ah binyan mefo-ar me-olam.

Anyone who didn't see the Holy Temple when it stood never saw a magnificent structure in his life.

Said Abaye (and some say it was Rav Chisda): "zeh binyan Hordos, this statement refers to the construction of Herod" (Talmud Sukkah 51b).

It wasn't the first Temple that Solomon built; and certainly not the small second Temple the returning exiles put up when they were permitted to do so. The most glorious Temple was the refurbished and enlarged version of the second Temple, which Herod completed about 500 years later, in 10 BCE. But that glorious structure was a long time coming. The people first had to contend with what we might call "survivor's guilt."

Let's go back more than 2500 years to 518 BCE. Not to Yom Kippur, but to Sukkot in the 2nd year of the reign of King Darius I of Persia. The Jewish people were celebrating Hoshanah Rabbah, the last day of the festival, in the newly completed second Temple. Priests and Levites were stationed with cymbals to give glory to God as King David of Israel had once ordained. They sang songs to praise God, "כִּי טוֹב, for God is good, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲדָד, God's steadfast love is eternal." The people sounded trumpets and sang joyously at the top of the lungs to celebrate the establishment of their new Temple.

But not everyone. The book of Ezra describes how priests and Levites and clan-heads who had known the first Temple wept loudly at the sight of this newly erected building. Rashi explains that these older folks could not rejoice with the young celebrants because they remembered what was. They knew what the Temple was supposed to look like. They remembered the pain of seeing that building destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's armies. They could not find joy in this tiny facsimile the cash-strapped community of Judeans and returnees from Babylon were able to erect.

Understanding the feelings of those older Jews, the prophet Haggai offered a message of hope:

Who is there left among you who saw this House in its former splendor? [He preached.] How does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing to you. But be strong, O Zerubbabel – says the Lord – be strong, O high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak; be strong, you people of the land – says the Lord – and act! For I am with you – says the Lord of Hosts. So I promised you when you came out of Egypt, and My spirit is still in your midst. Fear not, *Al tira!*

The world is not quite like it once was, the prophet admitted, but fear not! We will press on with our world as it is. We will maintain faith in the world as it should be. And perhaps someday. ...

I think about Hagai's hopeful, empathetic message in light of one of the stories I read in the Washington Post supplement honoring the 20th anniversary of 9/11. Raymond Pfeifer was a firefighter with Manhattan's Engine 40 Ladder 35 unit. On 9/11, though, he was not at the station. As he had done numerous times before, Ray traded his shift that day with Steven Mercado, a comrade with whom he had traded many shifts before. Ray spent the day golfing with other firefighters.

Of course, when they made the trade, neither could have possibly predicted that September 11, 2001, would have been so different from any other day. But the swap plagued Ray for years. For Steven Mercado was in the south tower when it collapsed.

And Ray Pfeifer was never the same. He became withdrawn, short-tempered, depressed, and – at times – angry. Family members noticed that Ray was unable to enjoy family celebrations or important life moments. Maybe he shared something in common with those older Jews who remembered the glorious times before their Holy Temple was destroyed. In losing a friend – together with 332 other firefighters – Ray Pfeifer lost a part of himself. People might advise him to move on, but how could he? The future could never compete with the past. What was lost could never be brought back. It became impossible to imagine something brighter.

But over time, things did change. It took many years, but two things happened. The first was terribly unfortunate. Around 2010, Ray was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, which doctors say was likely caused by months of exposure to all the toxins at Ground Zero. What started in the bladder had now spread throughout his body and to his bones. Most people would have greeted the diagnosis with fear or despair, but not Ray Pfeifer. For him, it brought a sense of calm. Because he no longer felt that he had somehow unfairly been spared the suffering of 9/11. As his wife Caryn described it, Ray accepted the illness almost as divine punishment; now he could share in the suffering of his comrades.

I don't quite agree with his theology of divine punishment, but I can appreciate the sentiment – or at least draw a lesson – as I hope others who have experienced "survivor's guilt" might do. The lesson is that no person's life is entirely good and devoid of pain; and the opposite is also true. Pain and suffering are not divine punishment; and joy and health are not divine reward. The world doesn't work that way. Which means that when we do experience pain, we are not alone; we are not singled out. And when we experience the blessings that inevitably follow, we need not feel guilty finding joy in them. Joy and pain are part of every life, and we must give ourselves permission to experience both.

That younger generation celebrating Sukkot in the structurally inferior second Temple had no reason to be ashamed of their joy. The new Temple could not replace the first; it was not as large or as beautiful; but the joys experienced within its walls were every bit as real. It is okay to live again, even as we promise never to forget.

The second thing that helped Ray's transformation is he got involved in a project to make a difference in the world. Ray obviously couldn't bring back his fallen comrades; and after surgery on his leg, he could no longer fight fires either. But he found a new purpose. Ray became an advocate for

families of 9/11 first responders who died – including the family of Steven Mercado, the one with whom he had traded that shift on 9/11. Ray rode his wheelchair from office to office on Capitol Hill and lobbied senators to vote to extend funding for benefits that were set to expire. You can imagine how effective his lobbying was.

Eventually, the cancer took its toll and Ray died in the spring of 2017. But he had become a different person. Days before his death, Ray described to a friend how he was feeling. “I can’t complain,” he said. “I’m a lucky guy.” It was almost 16 years since 9/11, but what a transformation! Ray Pfeifer was still the recipient of the same raw deal; but he came to understand that it is okay to live on after a loved one has passed – and not just okay, but necessary. Parts of life will never be the same, but there will be new joys to experience ... especially if we can muster a new sense of purpose.

In our tradition, remembering/Yizkor is linked to *tzedakah*. We say in the liturgy:

הנני נודב צדקה
In loving testimony to the lives of my loved ones, I pledge *tzedakah* to help perpetuate the ideals important to them. Through such deeds, and through prayer and remembrance, may their souls be bound up in the bond of life.

We hold the key to the storerooms that will fill the emptiness. We can fill the void with acts of kindness, acts of Torah, acts of *tzedakah* that perpetuate the legacies of loved ones and remind us that our lives are still worth living.

Last Shabbat in the synagogue, we read Moses’s announcement to the Israelites that he had reached the end of his road. “*לא אוכל עוד לצאת ולובא*,” he said. “I can no longer move in and out. I can no longer be active, and God has told me I will not cross the Jordan to the other side.” Moses calls to Joshua and tells him: “*חזק ואמץ*. Be strong and courageous!” You can do this. You will lead the people to the promised land where you will all experience joy. God will be with you as God was with me. “Just do not fear and do not be distressed.”

And then, perhaps sensing that the rest of the people might become debilitated by the pain and void of his absence, Moses offers a final commandment: *Hakhel*. Every seventh year on Sukkot, “*Hakhel*. You are going to gather all the people – men, women, children, and strangers – and you are going to read the Torah I gave you.” Moses may be gone, but his teachings will live on. There is purposeful work still to be done. We can be inspired by the teachings, the legacy of our loved ones.

In a completely different context, Emily Perl Kingsley, a longtime advocate for individuals with disabilities, wrote a piece about what it is like to raise a child with a disability. The experience of preparing for the baby, she writes, is “like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make wonderful plans. ... It’s all very exciting.” And then the plane lands and someone says over the loudspeaker, “Welcome to Holland.” It takes time. You learn to adjust. And then you realize that even though Holland is not Italy, it is a beautiful place in its own right and there is so much to appreciate and love.

The piece is a little dated, but it speaks a truth. Life takes us in different directions, and sometimes the circumstances are difficult. Certain disappointments or pains “never, ever, ever, go away.”

..." she concludes. "But ... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to go to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... about Holland."

We faced similar issues when we were forced to adapt to the realities of Covid. It wasn't easy to move our lives online. Many of us are eager to move back to the way things were. But it isn't easy ... and the road ahead will be marked by its own challenges. Will there be more people attending services or fewer? Will Zoom and livestream continue to be such an important part of our community? Will we ever fully recover from all the disruption and loss? It will take time. And it behooves us to remember that even on our altered path, our core values remain the same. Even on Zoom, our commitments to Torah, *hesed*, community, Israel and the Jewish future, love for one another will keep us together.

Rabbi Jack Riemer points to a short narrative from the book of Kings. After King Solomon died and the kingdom split, his son Rehoboam was left to rule a much-diminished southern kingdom of Judah. And that wasn't the worst of it. "In the fifth year of King Rehoboam's reign," we read, "King Shishak of Egypt marched against Jerusalem and carried off the treasures of the House of the Lord and the treasures of the royal palace. He carried off everything; he even carried off all the golden shields that Solomon had made."

The small kingdom of Judah had become defenseless. They had lost everything, and the poor king was left holding the bag. But we read in the very next verse: "King Rehoboam had bronze shields made instead, and he entrusted them to the officers of the guard who guarded the entrance to the royal palace. Whenever the king went to the House of Adonai, the guards would carry them and then bring them back to the armory of the guards." Rehoboam didn't have the money to replace the golden shields; there was no going back to the glorious heyday of Solomon. But the future was not lost. Rehoboam worked with what he had to create new shields. They were inferior; but Rehoboam still endowed them with sanctity. And Temple worship and other essential services of the kingdom continued unabated.

"Anyone who never saw the Holy Temple when it stood never saw a magnificent structure in his life." A *midrash* imagines God approaching the ruins of the first Temple and crying out in tears: "*Oy li al b'iti*, Woe is me for My house that has been destroyed. My children, where are you? My priests and Levites, where are you!" According to the *midrash*, God was inconsolable and resolved to join the people in exile.

The second Temple was no replacement for the first, but it became the centerpiece of a new communal life. Fortunes changed, the community grew, and Herod enlarged that little Temple to the point that it became even more spectacular than the first. And it also would not last.

We still mourn the destruction of that Temple. We visit its ruins in Jerusalem. We face them when we pray from here. The facsimiles we create – the *menorah*, the eternal flame to remember the flame that burned on the altar, the cover for the ark – are like Rehoboam's bronze shields as compared to the golden ones that they replaced. We remember. And we also move forward with Torah and prayer and new ways to express connections to our people and our God.

We can never replace the past. At Yizkor, we remember parents who died too young and left us stranded and without direction. We remember spouses who loved and supported us and left seemingly insurmountable voids in our lives. We remember children who were tragically plucked away and had us wishing it were us instead. We remember grandparents and aunts and uncles who impacted us in ways we cannot adequately describe to the next generation. But time does not freeze for us as it did for them. Time moves on. Life moves on. And we owe it to ourselves to appreciate all that *is* now, even as we remember the glory of what was and what could have been.

20 years after 9/11; 1,951 years after the destruction of the second Temple; days, months, or years after countless personal tragedies, we live on for the perpetuation of Torah and community and values that generations have passed on to us.

I pray in the words of the prophet Haggai: "*Hazak*. Be strong and remember the promise of our God whose spirit still stands in our midst."

I pray in the words of Moses: "*Hizku v'imtzu, al tir'u v'al ta-aritzu*, Be strong and courageous; have no fear and have no dread. For Adonai your God marches with you. God will not fail us. God will not forsake us. Be strong and courageous."

I pray in the words of our tradition: *G'mar Hatimah Tovah*, May each of us be inscribed for goodness and blessing in the year that awaits us. Amen.