



Acting From Miriam Mindset to Dispel Distrust and Despair

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Shanah tovah. Most years those seasonal words of greeting flow easily for me from a place of hope and optimism. This year, as I wrote them and prepared to say them, they feel more like an anxious prayer. I'm inclined to say *kein yehi ratson* – please God, *shanah tovah* – a good year - so may it be!

Two years ago, as we prepared to greet the New Year 5781, we knew we were not ok. It didn't need to be said - stress, fear, exhaustion, isolation – all compounded by the uncertainty of when exactly we'd be able to physically embrace our loved ones again. Remember two years ago? Physical contact with anyone outside of our households was dangerous, if not for ourselves then for others we cared for! Do you remember that feeling? Or maybe you remember more the relief in finally being able to embrace one another again? In those early days – even that whole first year – we knew we were not ok. It made sense.

But now – what's troubling us now? As I prepared these words I sat with tangible tightness in my chest, anxiety squeezing my throat. I planned for but struggled to let myself imagine fully the joyful, healing power in this moment of returning to one another. Just look at us! Finally back together in our sanctuary, and with long-term investments in our capacity to continue connecting remotely. Back to school, back to work, back to live music and dining in restaurants and long-distance travel...! But we're still not ok. And now, perhaps because we don't expect it the way we did a couple of years ago - from others and in ourselves - it feels so difficult to acknowledge our exhaustion, our anxiety, our sadness. To face our trauma. I don't want this! I want so much for it to be otherwise – this is not the drash I expected to bring you this evening! - but the reality is, we are not ok.

And of course, because we, as individuals, are not ok, it is much more difficult to be in relationship with one another. Our interpersonal relationships are under tremendous strain, and we are witnessing the fracturing of public discourse and communal spaces all around us. The helpers – the service professionals among us - flight attendants, teachers, summer camp staff - are being abused, as we



enact our trauma upon one another. In 2021, about 85% of U.S. flight attendants said they'd dealt with an unruly passenger. 17% said they've been physically assaulted. Sara Nelson, president of the AFA and a flight attendant for two decades, told ABC News: "Since the FAA started keeping track of reports of incidents like this on board, we've had more events in 2021 than we've had in the entire history of that record keeping in aviation." That record keeping began in 1995. TSA posted signs in airports that read, "No threats. No verbal abuse. No physical violence of any kind. If you threaten, endanger or harm Transportation Security Officers during screening, TSA will pursue criminal penalties and fines..."¹ I think we can all agree that this shouldn't even need to be said. No, we are not ok.

In an Issue Brief published at the end of May 2022, The White House wrote, "The pandemic has led to profound changes that have accompanied an overall decline in mental health. About half of women and a third of men have reported worsening mental health since the beginning of the pandemic..."

And the thing is, we weren't exactly in great shape before the pandemic began. In the same report, The White House wrote, "There are several indications that Americans were experiencing a mental health crisis prior to the pandemic. Between 2008 and 2019, the percentage of adolescents...that reported having experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year increased nearly 90 percent...while [over the same period] the percentage of young adults...reporting at least one major depressive episode in the past year increased a similar 81 percent..." I can't miss an opportunity to insert here that this just happens to be the same 10-year period in which social media was introduced and became ubiquitous...but that's a drash for another day...That said, while I've interrupted myself, I hope that you'll consider joining the members of our Tikkun Olam Leadership Team in our Yom Kippur afternoon discussion about our community's involvement with the Care First, Jails Last Coalition, working to increase available services in Alameda County for those in acute mental health crisis.

But back to our White House brief: "Although rates of depression were highest among adolescents and young adults, more broadly in 2019, over one in five adults age 18 or older were classified as having a mental illness..." So, before

¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/US/flight-attendants-nearing-breaking-point-job-manage/story?id=81625829>



the pandemic hit, more than 20% of American adults lived with a mental illness. Looking around this room – both in person and on Zoom – and counting off by five, we start to grasp the enormity of that number.

And then the pandemic hit. And in March of 2022 the World Health Organization published its finding of a 25% increase in the global prevalence of anxiety and depression, triggered by the onset of the pandemic.²

Anxiety and depression. Fear and sadness on a clinical level. Not surprising during the isolation of the shelter-in-place orders. During that time we all learned a deeper meaning of God's realization about the nature of human beings in Genesis 2:18, "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado* – it is not good for the human being to be alone." But why now? Why does this broad unwellness persist?

I think it's because we are carrying serious trauma. All of us. Every person in this human family across the globe. For some the weight of that trauma is heavier than others – various forms of privilege having served as a protective buffer. But for all of us, our lives were turned upside down. Prior to the pandemic none of us could have imagined that schools and workplaces could just close and the systems on which we relied every day could just grind to a shocking halt. That the institutions and processes whose presence and reliability we never questioned could just suddenly stop. But they did. On a previously unimaginable scale. And this was profoundly destabilizing. At a very deep level it shook our faith in what and who we could rely on. And now, even as things rebound, we are left with a crippling deficit in trust. If that could happen, we wonder, then what can we really count on?! Our trauma whispers to us that nothing and no one is truly reliable.

And, as with our widespread mental health crisis, which began prior to the onset of the pandemic and has only worsened as a result, so too the widespread erosion of trust. In a 2020 article in *The Atlantic*,³ David Brooks described this "moment of moral convulsion" as an earthquake. He wrote, "The events of 2020—the coronavirus pandemic; the killing of George Floyd; militias, social-media mobs, and urban unrest—were like hurricanes that hit in the middle

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<https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/collapsing-levels-trust-are-devastating-america/616581/>



of that earthquake. They did not cause the moral convulsion, but they accelerated every trend. They flooded the ravines that had opened up in American society and exposed every flaw...The cancer of distrust has spread to every vital organ."

As I said, this is not the drash I expected to give tonight. Not the one I want to give on Erev Rosh HaShanah, which is usually a time for spiritual and emotional uplift. And especially not on this Erev Rosh HaShanah – an evening containing the possibility of exuberant joy and pent-up release at our gathering, our return to one another. But, in recent months, it's become clear to me that this widespread cancer of distrust is living inside each of us. We bring it with us everywhere we go. Into every interaction with others. Including, unfortunately, here inside this community. I want it to be otherwise. We all need it to be otherwise. So how do we make it so? How do we turn the greeting of this season into a blessing – *shanah tovah* – how do we build this into a good year?

It's a lot to ask of traumatized people. It's a big lift, and maybe it doesn't feel fair or just. Why should we, exhausted and beaten down and discriminated against and made to feel invisible and oppressed and hurt in infinite ways over and over and over again...why should we be the ones to find – or create?! - the expansive space? How is it fair to ask us to draw on any dwindling reserves we still have to open from positive presupposition and trust? Trust based on what?!

We should be the ones because we have to be the ones. Because there is no one else. And because we can. Because generational trauma is not the only thing passed to us from our ancestors – also generational resilience. Also how to get up from our pain and our fear and build a future that none of us have ever experienced but that we can see and describe in bright, vivid color. Because the whole idea of *t'shuvah* calls us to rediscover that part of ourselves that has this capacity – not to be doormats – but to create, little by little, the families, community and world in which we want to live.

Once there was an enslaved young woman. The least of the least. Disempowered among the disempowered, to be young and female among enslaved people. But she had a sacred and precious gift. She held within her the gift of hope. Of vision for a future unlike the present in which she lived. And while her community around her rushed to pack their necessities – only the



things they could carry on their backs and in such a hurry to get out that they didn't even have time for their bread to rise – this young female slave packed a musical instrument. A timbrel. Because, trauma-raised though she was, the young prophet Miriam believed that there would come a time when her people would need to sing and dance, and she would be ready.

Stanford psychology professor Alia Crum is an expert in the field of mindsets. In a recent interview on the NPR podcast, *Hidden Brain*,⁴ she defined mindsets as “...core assumptions that we make about the nature of ourselves or things in the world...we have mindsets about our own abilities or our intelligence...about the nature of stress...the capabilities or limitations of our own bodies...they're perspectives, they're lenses or frameworks...assumptions about the meaning or the nature of...things...Our perceptions, our beliefs, our experiences are always an interpretation. They're always filtered through the lenses, the mindsets, that we have.”

Host Shankar Vedantam interjects to clarify, “So in some ways I think what you're saying is that there might be an objective reality out in the world, but as it comes through our minds, we have different choices in some ways of how we process that objective reality...” And Professor Crum affirms, “That's exactly right...the key is that the mindsets that you have have an effect. They influence what you expect. They influence what you pay attention to. They influence our physiology and they influence what we actually do. And, therefore, they create the reality that's implied.”

So I'd like to coin a phrase. Let's call it Miriam mindset. We don't know why Miriam is named as a prophet in Exodus 15:20. As I shared in Torah Study a few months ago, she's one of only 5 women named as prophets in the entire Hebrew Bible, and it's not exactly clear why she merits the title of prophet. Unlike the other *neviot* – female prophets – there are no biblical accounts of her prophesying, or even of moments in which she is in direct conversation with God. So maybe the thing that makes her a prophet is her mindset. This orientation towards hope and joy, towards what's possible, well beyond anything through which she's lived. It wasn't Pollyanna. She was right. She prepared for the possibility and when it came, her People needed her, and she was ready.

⁴ <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/reframing-your-reality-part-1/>



Miriam, like us, surely carried trauma. But she was not defined by her trauma. Her mindset calls to us through the millennia, through the fear and anguish of our People, through our own individual pain and the miasma of despair choking our every breath as we witness and experience with horror the suffering all around us, the ravages of climate change, the cancer of distrust spreading around and through us.

We are not ok. And neither was Miriam's generation, and, let's be honest, neither was Miriam. The gift of our Hebrew Bible is how profoundly human our prophets were. Miriam was punished for gossiping about her brother and, like the other adults in her generation, did not merit entering the Promised Land. And we are not prophets. And the bending arc of the moral universe is more jagged and less linear when we look up close. But it's still bending. We're still called to bend it towards justice.

Because we can be inspired by our prophets. Even under the weight of our trauma, we can stop the spread of the cancer of distrust. We can clear away the miasma of despair. Inspired by our prophet Miriam, we can reach more often for the music of hope, and lead others into the joyful dance of possibility. We can start from positive presupposition – choosing to believe that the people around us are equally as well-informed and well-intentioned as we are, and that we are all doing the very best we can. We can take a deep breath and a leap of faith and we can start from trust, practicing with one another here in this community. We'll be actively working on this together in the coming months – keep your eye out for more information on that later this fall.

We can strive to act from Miriam mindset more often in the New Year, grounded in the full awareness of our trauma, and our baseline fallible humanity. We'll be back again one year from now reflecting on the times we just didn't have it in us, having let distrust and despair overwhelm us, and needing to ask forgiveness of the people we approached without positive presupposition.

But for now, right now, the New Year is dawning. A clean page in the story of our lives – collectively and as individuals. Let us shake off the accumulated fear and sadness from the last year – or years! Let's reach out our hands to one another and follow the distant sound of the timbrel, reverberating in our bones through



the past and into the future. In this New Year may we find the strength to act more from Miriam mindset. As we choose to renew our trust in one another, let us join in the dance of what's possible. In this way we will make this a *shanh tovah u'metukah* – a good and sweet year. *Kein yehi ratson*. So may it be.