

Rebuilding Values – Kol Nidre
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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We're all broken in this moment. In ways large and small the coronavirus pandemic has broken us. Communities that cannot come together. Classes that cannot meet. Businesses slowing or folding. Friendships strained by a lack of hugs. Relationships strained by no contact or too much time in four walls. Our personal brokenness is compounded by a world around us that feels broken. Americans who cannot talk to one another – the stitches of our republic under real strain. People of color expressing their truths, their fears, their lived reality of racism and violence. Antisemitism exclaiming “Jews will not replace us” and using anti-Zionism as thinly veiled anti-Semitism. Police officers – public servants sworn to protect us – under siege because a small number have done some truly horrendous things. So much brokenness, so much pain, so much so different from one year ago.

How do we go forward from here? How do we get through the pandemic? How do we chart a course from racism to equity? How do we rebuild our businesses? How do we reconceive citizenship? How do we take responsibility for ourselves, our communities, our nation? How do we take responsibility for this fragile world so under siege? Partisans on the left and right will give you slogans in lieu of answers. Policy wonks on either side will suggest more or less government – depending on what the polls say. The way forward will require policy. It will require relationships. It will require compassion and honesty and good faith and vision. And underlying all of that will be a foundation of values and ethics. We cannot begin to see a way forward until we recognize and commit to the values needed to guide our behavior, our relationships, our communities, and eventually our politics and our policies. Values and ethics not come upon by default, by lazy adherence to the status quo, but instead values and ethics intentionally drawn from the deep well of Jewish tradition.

Brokenness was simple in the Torah. If you were suffering, God was punishing you for doing something wrong. Do the right thing, and the suffering would cease. If that wouldn't spur us to examine our values, I don't know what would.

But the paradigmatic example of brokenness in our tradition is not from the Torah, it is the Roman destruction of The Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. We know why it was destroyed: a backwater province of the empire revolted and Rome squashed the rebellion. But our sources do not speak of the realpolitik of the moment. The sources do not examine who victimized us. The sources ask, instead, what made Jerusalem deserve destruction. Baseless hatred of Jew versus Jew. Ugly politics devoid of respect and dignity. A failure to uphold the commandments. Greed of The Temple priests. Ignorance of God's laws.¹ Each reason given by the rabbis illustrated a moral shortfall and an opportunity to improve the Jewish community and individual Jews. Each reason actually represented something that might make Jerusalem worthy of rebuilding. The rabbinic logic said, “Do not feel sorry for yourself. Instead, ask what we can learn.”

¹ Reasons derived from Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b & Shabbat 119b

Few of us have lived through brokenness like this before. But we would be wise to echo the response of the tradition to the destruction of The Temple. We would be wise to look within, to examine who we may become because of this pandemic. When everything is so broken is the time to clarify our values. Indeed, it is one of the few constructive responses that we have, a response that could even lead to hope.

Judaism, of course, provides endless raw material with which we can work to clarify our values. That well of Jewish ideas and values is eternally deep, often contradictory, definitely nuanced, and impossible to simply encapsulate. Ethics worth pursuing are complicated. They are not soundbites. They provide as many questions as answers. They force us to consider who we are, what kind of community we live in, in what sort of nation we dwell. They ask something of us, some sort of sacrifice, some sort of compromise. Living out these values will determine how we ensure a world that is decent, compassionate, beautiful, meaningful, and important.

With values we will rebuild, values like life. Nothing rises above the value of life, of each individual human life. Nothing. In Leviticus 18 God declares, “You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which people shall live.”² The point of the Torah is to live. We even desecrate Shabbat in order to save a life.³ A year ago the primacy of life would have seemed obvious. Today politicians and analysts speak cavalierly about acceptable numbers of deaths during the pandemic. Judaism says that no loss is acceptable. We do not sacrifice human life on the altar of the economy or the stock market. We do not accept deaths so that bars and bowling alleys can open. In this moment, the most important thing that we need to do, personally and nationally, is to protect life, every life: white, black, gay, straight, rich, poor, insured, uninsured, American, Ethiopian, or Chinese. Judaism is clear that no life is more or less valuable than any other, no one’s blood runs redder than anyone else’s.⁴ Can we live in a way which actualizes this value? Can we distribute scarce resources according to that value? Can we protest and police according to that value? Can our immigration policy adhere to this value? No life is greater than another. Can we live that way? I believe we can. I believe that we would sacrifice to live out this value. We will rebuild with the value of life.

With values we will rebuild, values like work. The great Rabbi Akiva taught, “treat your Sabbath like a weekday rather than be dependent on man.”⁵ If you need to work on the Sabbath to prevent poverty, then you should work on the Sabbath. Maimonides expands on this by teaching that the highest form of charity is to give someone a job.⁶ Work matters. It matters for basic sustenance and putting food on the table. It matters for a sense of dignity and purpose and enables generosity. So many of us have been impacted by the economic challenges of the pandemic. We have lost jobs or income. We have had to lay people off. We have seen charities on whose boards we sit furlough decades long employees. We have had to make difficult, impossible decisions. This value of employment asks us: Once life is protected; how can we help people support themselves? What are we, what are our companies, willing to give up to make sure that people can support their families? We will rebuild with the value of work.

² Leviticus 18:1-5

³ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 85a-b

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 112a

⁶ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7

With values we will rebuild, values like responsibility. Some nations irresponsibly allowed the virus run rampant in the name of economy or a mis-guided sense of liberty. Some nations stopped the virus in its track thanks to a sense of personal and communal responsibility. The disease is global, but the solutions are local, hyperlocal. Deuteronomy says that if we see our neighbor's sheep gone astray, we are obligated to bring it back to our neighbor.⁷ We are responsible for one another. And we need to recognize the danger that we pose to others. We cannot be like the man on the boat who begins to drill a hole under his seat. "What are you doing?" ask his fellow passengers. "Of what concern is it to you? I'm only drilling under my seat!" Now more than ever, we can see how our actions have direct impact on those around us. Coronavirus has shown us, in the starkest terms, that everything we do impacts those around us – and those far from us. We are all connected and I believe that we can start living that way. We will rebuild with the value of responsibility.

With values we will rebuild, values like uniqueness. We are all created in the image of God.⁸ And we are all utterly unique. What one person needs is so different from what other people need. Always true. Even more true in this moment of brokenness. Needs cannot only be quantified in terms on money, but also in dignity, connection, compassion, boundaries, care, respect. We cannot imagine that what we want will satisfy the needs of another. We can only be there for each other when we see beyond ourselves, beyond what we need to the unique needs of our spouses, parents, children, friends, and neighbors. Imagine a world where we stop to acknowledge the uniqueness of the other. We will rebuild with the value of uniqueness.

With values we will rebuild, values like humility. From my vantage point as a rabbi, I know that the stability we create for ourselves is a thin veneer. We adorn the structures of our lives with that veneer. We cover it with beautiful cloths and our favorite things. But I know, and the pandemic lays bare, that stability and safety are thin, that danger and sickness and instability is always right around the corner. It is scary. And it is beautiful – for it makes all the good and inspiring things that much more precious, indeed, it makes them holy. When there is a vaccine, will we hold on to this fragility? Will we allow the humility we have gained during this pandemic to stay with us, to help us embrace life more tightly, to count our blessings, to feel a bit more gratitude and kindness and compassion? We will rebuild with the value of humility.

Life. Work. Responsibility. Uniqueness. Humility. Some of the many Jewish values that we can embrace to build a moral pivot, a point upon which we can remain flexible while doubling down on our humanity, our morality, the better parts of our nature. They will determine if we grow from this brokenness or allow it to break us. I believe that we will follow in the footsteps of our ancestors. We will grow back into a people more compassionate and decent and caring. We will take this time of brokenness to look within as did our ancestors when The Temple fell. We will allow the light to enter the cracks and experience renewed growth, growth of the moral foundations that will take us into a better future. Please God.

⁷ Deuteronomy 22:1

⁸ Genesis 1:27