

For What Do you Hunger? Tisha B'Av (Shabbat Devarim) 5778

On Tuesday morning, I sat at my desk, as I often do, making a cup of coffee to help start my day. As I was pouring the water, preparing the beans, and looking at my assemblage of coffee mugs, one caught my eye. It is possibly one of my favorite mugs, because it is interactive. On it is simply the question, “What would Aaron Alexander do?”

For those of you who don't know him, Rabbi Aaron Alexander serves the Washington D.C. area as a part of the clergy team at Adas Israel Congregation. Before that, however, he was one of the deans of the Ziegler Rabbinical School in Los Angeles, and was one of my teachers. He was one of the first people to welcome me into the vast storehouses of written halakhot composed by the Sages of our tradition, the brilliant minds who, for two millennia, have been debating and determining the shared, legal framework of our Jewish world. But more than this, he showed me that I could care about the chain of tradition that stretched back to time immemorial and still be present and engaged as an ethical voice in the modern world.

I was thinking about Rabbi Alexander so pointedly because I was trying to decide whether or not I would be arrested on Thursday. Like many of you, I pay

attention to the news, and I have been appalled to see the near constant assault on the moral and ethical underpinnings of our society. I frequently have conversations with community organizers, legal advocates, and other clergy to see what can be done. During one such conversation, I was asked to be a part of a delegation of clergy who would be joining in a protest on Thursday inside the federal building with the goal of fighting against the unlawful and unethical treatment of immigrants, especially families who have been torn apart with children put in separate, inhumane prison camps. The idea was to make a powerful statement as faith leaders about where our values stand by holding a sit-in inside the lobby of the building and peacefully demonstrating until we would be removed by police.

So, sitting at my desk, coffee on my desk and a sick 3-year-old snuggling in my lap, and I asked myself, "What would Aaron Alexander do?" And I thought about everything I knew and had learned.

I thought about the words we will be reading from our prophets connected to Tisha B'Av, which falls today and which we will observe tomorrow in honor of Shabbat. I thought about Jeremiah (9:18), whose words we read during the Tisha B'Av morning service, who calls on us to feel the painful tragedies of our past, saying:

For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: 'O how we are ruined! We are put to shame, for we must leave the land, because they have cast down our dwellings!'

And I think about the broken families, the children crying for parents, the parents cut off from children, and those who had only hoped to make this land their own, who are shamed, treated as less than human, and sent away from their homes. I try to imagine the despair of being cut off from the life you knew and being tossed into the uncertain tempest of an unjust system.

I thought too about the words we will read hours later, at Tisha B'Av mincha, where the prophet Isaiah (55:12, 56:7) calls us to action, saying:

*For with joy shall you go forth, and with peace shall you be brought; the mountains and the hills shall burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap hands... I will bring them to My holy mount, and I will cause them to rejoice in My house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My altar, **for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.***

That is the goal, the dream, that our tradition teaches us. How can our homes be sacred dwellings if we remove people from their homes, if we shame and abuse them? How can we take shelter in our houses of prayer when our neighbors are

torn from theirs? How can we work, through our words and deeds, to move closer to God's holy mount, to make this world one that is fit to be called sacred?

And I thought about Rabbi Alexander and Rabbi Dr. Aryeh Cohen and Rabbi Elliot Dorff and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Rabbi Ron Shapiro and Rabbi Jessica Shafrin. I thought about Bill Black and Emily Weitzman Rosenbaum and Jeannie Appleman. I thought about all of the teachers who had ever inspired me, believed in me, and helped me dedicate my life to holding people's joys and sorrows, to being a helper and a guide, and to channeling the Jewish wisdom of the last four thousand years into making the world the place it is supposed to be, the place we hope in can be.

And I sat with that coffee, thinking about the fast only a few days ahead, and I thought to myself, "What am I hungry for?" What are you hungry for? Why do we fast? Is it because we are so very sad that the Temple was destroyed almost 2000 years ago and that we can't offer animal sacrifices? Because that doesn't speak to me. I don't especially want to offer animal sacrifices. Is the fast to commemorate Jews who were oppressed and exiled and killed by the Romans, the British, the French, the Germans, the Poles, the Russians, the Americans, and every other civilization we've lived in? Maybe; I think that is a piece of what this holiday tries to teach us.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I am not only hungry for a connection to the past and a sense of ownership in their suffering. I am hungry for a different world. I am hungry to move from a world of injustice to a world of equity. I am hungry to move out of the world of Jeremiah, so full of its oppression, shame, and lamentation, and into the world of Isaiah, a world which will be a home for all peoples. I am hungry for a time when we don't need a Tisha B'Av, when the very idea of oppression and hate is beyond comprehension. I am hungry for a world in which being my best self never means separating myself from you or shaming you or hurting you or hating you or criminalizing you simply for existing near me.

So, at 3:30 pm this past Thursday, I sat in a circle with 20 other clergy members of different faiths and traditions in the middle of the federal building. We sang songs from our traditions, from our shared American heritage, and we linked arms. And we held one another. We continued to sing as the homeland security officers tried to quiet us down and warned us repeatedly to disperse. We held each other as we were forced, one by one, to move in handcuffs to a holding facility within the building. We continued to cry out on behalf of those whose voices are ignored by those with power even as they charged us with "creating a loud or unusual noise or a nuisance."

And before I knew it, each of us had a citation, and one by one, over the course of a few hours, we were escorted off the property, our handcuffs were removed, and we were told not to enter the building again that day. What I didn't know until I went outside was that as soon as the police were called, they shut down the building and began to evacuate people, that there were people who had to leave their work and stop their day because of our action. I talked to some and most expressed the mix of frustration at having a normal day disrupted, but an also an acknowledgement that being peacefully, respectfully disruptive in order to stand for your values is a part of the very fabric of a free society, regardless of whether we agree with the content of the message.

When I walked down the street, the group of protesters who had been supporting our actions from outside the building through songs, chants, and cheers, ran toward us and hugged us. One young woman said, "Thank you. You don't know what it means to see someone stand up for me, for my family, for my community. You will never know how watching clergy people risk themselves, and put their bodies in harm's way to defend those without power has given me hope."

Throughout the next day or so, we will be called upon revisit our history and to lament the ways in which the Jewish People have suffered. But don't just

fast to honor those who have suffered in the past; remember those who are suffering now. Remember that there are people, right here in this city, in this country, and around the world who are STILL judged as less worthy than others simply by the color of their skin, country of origin, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or gender identity. Just as our rabbis teach that *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, caused the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, so too we are called upon today to fight the destruction that baseless hatred wreaks in our own communities each and every day. Because after I was released, I was able to head home, hug my wife, look at my pajama-clad children, kiss their faces, and go to sleep in our home together. The people I chose to stand up for didn't get that same privilege.

Today is the 9th of Av. Tonight, we will don our mourning garb, sit low to the ground, and lament our past through singing dirges, reading Eicha (The Book of Lamentations), and afflicting our bodies through fasting. I hope and pray that it is enough. If we remember the past without it changing our future, then what is the point?! If we afflict our bodies and souls, but keep our eyes closed to the affliction of our neighbor, what have we gained?

I hope that each of you who choose to partake have a meaningful fast, and that recalling tragedies in our past can help each of us step up in order to prevent

those tragedies from being repeated for anyone else, in any age. I hope that you can act to make this world worthy to be a house for all peoples. And I hope you remember what you are hungry for and do something about it. Shabbat Shalom.