

## The Day After – Rebuilding Jewish Tradition

A group of elderly, retired men gather each morning at a cafe in Tel Aviv. They drink their coffee and sit for hours discussing the world situation. Given the state of the world, their talks usually are depressing. One day, one of the men startles the others by announcing, "You know what? I am an optimist." The others are shocked, but then one of them notices something fishy. "Wait a minute! If you're an optimist, why do you look so worried?" "You think it's easy to be an optimist?"

In a year full of crises, being an optimist was certainly not easy. In just one year we experienced the Pandemic of 1918, the economic collapse of 1929, and the political upheaval of 1968, *all at the same time!* Last year was the first time in anyone's memory that the *entire* Jewish people stayed home on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There were no services in synagogues, there was no Torah to dance with on Simhat Torah, and we were all socially distanced. Never before did I have to convince a bride that a wedding in an empty sanctuary with a zoom camera was going to be every bit as magical and sacred as a beautiful wedding surrounded by hundreds of friends. Never before did I stand in a cemetery with only a handful of family when there should have been dozens to embrace the mourners with hugs. Too many precious souls died alone in ICU units because family was forbidden to enter. Too many bubbes and zaydes didn't have a hand to hold except for the nurse wearing three layers of PPE. And yet, through it all, we continued to learn, celebrate, mourn, pray, and support each other. You did this. We did this. We kept Jewish life alive in this community and if I could, I would give each of you a hug. I may be exhausted, but I look back at this year with a sense of absolute wonder at what we accomplished together.

Of all the questions I have been asked recently, the most common is: "Rabbi, when are we going back to normal? When is it *all going to go back to normal?*" The answer to that question is:

“we’re not.” We’re not going *back* to normal. Yes, we will have kiddushes again; yes, we will gather for programs, classes, dinners, and concerts, but we are not going back to the Judaism that *was* a year and a half ago. A crisis like this one, a catastrophe like this one, changes us. The only question is: how? As a perennial optimist, I have some good news. This happens to be something the Jewish people have a particular genius for. Throughout our history we have responded to one catastrophe after another with creativity, turning every crisis into possibility and opportunity. That’s the pattern of Jewish history. Understanding how and why, however, is the key that will unlock the Jewish future – a future that begins today.

We normally tell the story of the Jewish people as a narrative of continuity. We take great pride in tradition, in seeing ourselves as the continuation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. We see ourselves as part of a chain of generations, claiming authenticity on the basis of that continuity. Moses received Torah at Sinai and gave it to us. That’s the story we tell, and it’s very compelling. Under the narrative of continuity our job is to transmit. We take what they gave us from the past, we dust it off, and we give it to the future. Our great anxiety is whether our grandchildren will take this tradition as seriously as our grandparents. That’s why Simon Rawidowicz called us the “every-dying people.” But I want to suggest that there is another narrative, a narrative that runs counter to the first and is also true. This is the narrative of *discontinuity*.

One of the great ironies of Judaism is that the great books of our tradition, the *traditional* books, the books that are passed on from generation to generation, were authored not in moments of continuity but out of the crises of discontinuity. In moments of continuity, you don’t need to write a book. You just read the book you read yesterday. It’s in moments of discontinuity that someone sits down and says, “alright, here’s how it’s going to be.” The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible)

was created out of the destruction of the First Temple and the exile into Babylonia. The Talmud emerges from the ashes of the Second Temple. Maimonides and the philosophical tradition comes out of confrontation with philosophical traditions carried by Muslims. The Zohar was created out of the Reconquista of Spain on behalf of Christianity and the loss of Jewish freedom and political power in the Iberian Peninsula. Hassidism develops out of the crisis of the Sabbatian messianic movement and the Khmelnitsky massacres. Modern Zionism first appears in the era of emancipation. Time and again it was from moments of discontinuity that the true pillars of our tradition emerged.

Many Jews would argue, and many others vote with their feet, that the High Holidays are the most important commemoration on the Jewish calendar. Today, with all due respect to Rosh Hashanah, I want to suggest that the greatest commemoration actually occurred seven weeks ago. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, we sat in a darkened sanctuary and read the book of *Eicha*, mourning the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. As important as that day was, the *most* important day was the day after, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Av. It is what happened next. The Jewish people didn't lie down and die, we stood up and we redefined ourselves. In the ancient world, a people was defined, primarily, by its land, its culture, its customs, its language, its dress, and its food. Remove one of these and a people begins to dissolve. Remove two of them and they are finished. That was the theory the Assyrians and the Babylonians used to pacify ancient Israel. You take away the leaders of the community in the north and south, resettle them in the cosmopolitan metropolis of the imperial capital, and they will disappear. By the waters of Babylon, there we sat and there we wept because how could we sing a song of Zion on foreign soil. Out of that crisis we should have disappeared.

The daughter of one of my colleagues works as a clinical psychologist in Arizona near Phoenix. The clinic has a federal contract to provide mental health services to the Navajo Reservation. Most of her clients are Navajo women because she has an expertise in trauma and drug addiction. Everything that you have read about them is true. There are tremendous incidents of domestic abuse, drug addiction, and psychological problems. Why? One hundred and fifty years ago, the United States dispossessed, disempowered, and humiliated the Navajo Nation. One hundred and fifty years later they are still suffering the psychological consequences of that catastrophe. How is it that the Navajos lost their land and lost themselves, while *we* lost *our* land, but we didn't lose ourselves? We kept our identity. Not only did we *keep* our identity, we *developed* our identity.

This capacity for survival goes back to the story of Joseph. Joseph was sent into exile by his brothers, and by the time they showed up 21 years later what did he say to them? "You intended evil, but God made it good. God sent me here to save lives." Our people has a remarkable ability to change the narrative, to change the narrative from catastrophe to opportunity. In thinking about our present crisis, what is the narrative of COVID that we have to tell? What are the narratives that will open up opportunities and possibilities? What is that narrative going to be? I want to suggest three narratives from our tradition that will help frame how we can respond to this present moment.

The first narrative comes from the prophet Amos talking to the Northern Kingdom of Israel before their destruction. What does he say to them? "I will give the order and shake the House of Israel. All the sinners of My people Shall perish by the sword. In that day, I will set up again the fallen house of David: I will mend its breaches and set up its ruins anew. I will build it firm as in the days of old...I will restore My people Israel" (Amos 9:9-14). For Amos, catastrophe is a moment of refinement, it is an invitation to a new beginning. Those of us that have sufficient

religious imagination, creativity, and courage to remain loyal to God under conditions of exile will be the ones to survive and see the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Those who hold fast to the way things used to be will not live past the exilic experience. Put in a modern context, if we reconceive what it means to be Jewish, reinvent a sense of national mission, reshape institutions, develop new institutions, and foster strategic partnerships between institutions, we will survive this catastrophe.

Think about these last 18 months. How is the experience that *we* have just gone through an invitation to rebirth and renewal? As our former congregant Rahm Emanuel liked to say, “Never let a perfectly good crisis go to waste.” What is it from this moment that we can finally say, “You know, there are patterns of Jewish existence that we are *finally* willing to let go of. COVID has taught us that we can’t hold on to this stuff anymore. *We have* to change things.” Think about the way we are now streaming all our services, providing a portal of entry for individuals who can’t physically be here. Think about the new rolls people have taken, stepping up into positions of leadership. Think about the ways in which we crave human connection, now more than ever. We are changing.

In a certain crazy and strange way, this experience is an ironic scolding of American individualism. COVID came along and said, “you want to be a sovereign self? You want to be distanced? You want no one to tell you what to do? Good. Tell you what, I’ll give it to you. Tell me how you like it for a year and a half of not getting to hug your grandkids, not getting to see your parents, not getting to stand with your congregation to say kaddish.” Dr. Vivek Murthy, US Surgeon General, recently wrote in his book *Together* that we have a public health emergency and it’s not cancer, environmental health, obesity, or smoking, it’s loneliness. Social distancing is the ultimate prophetic castigation of American individualism. Recovering a sense of communal responsibility is something we might actually learn from this moment. Remember the words of

Amos, through refinement and change we can see the world through different eyes. In fact, we will experience this as a new beginning. That's narrative #1.

The second narrative follows the destruction of the Second Temple. While there are several rabbinic stories about the fall of Jerusalem, none really document what happened next. I want to suggest, and I have absolutely no evidence except a rabbi's intuition, that we in fact do have a text. In my imagination, the survivors of Jerusalem go to the great Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and ask the great questions that survivors always ask: "what do we do now? We have no Temple, no Priests, no land, no city. Has God abandoned us? Is the covenant gone? Does any of it make sense anymore?" We have no historical record of what Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said, but I can use my imagination. I think *Pirkei Avot* – the teachings of our Sages – was his response. *Pirkei Avot* is a handbook on how you rebuild, reconstruct, and renew a community after destruction.

*Pirkei Avot* first begins with an introduction: "*Kol yisrael yesh lahem helek l'olam haba* – All Israel have a portion in the world-to-come." The most important word here is: *all*. Everyone belongs. The first thing Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said is, "I don't care who you were before, who you were before is irrelevant. Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Hassidim, it doesn't matter. Republicans, Democrats, Likudniks, Laborniks, it doesn't matter. The destruction has come. We are all just Jews seeking a way. You all have a place here." Rule number one for building a new community in the wake of catastrophe is *radical inclusivity*. Rule number two: "*Moshe kibel Torah mi'Sinai* – Moses received the Torah at Sinai and passed it on to succeeding generations." The new focus of Jewish life is no longer Bet Hamikdash (the Temple) but Bet Hamidrash (the house of learning). Torah is what we now hold. It is what David Winnicott called a transitional object. It is what will carry us from yesterday to tomorrow. Torah is now the core of our being.

Rule #3, the most important rule: *Al shelosha devarim ha'olam omed, al hatorah v'al ha'avoda v'al gemilut hasadim* – On three things the world stands: on Torah, on prayer, and on acts of loving-kindness. Think about the context of these words. The Temple is destroyed, the Priests are murdered, the sacrifices are gone, the alter has been desecrated, the city is burning, there is blood in the streets, and the people come to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and say, “nu, what do we do?” What does he tell them? The *world still stands*, and it stands on three new institutions, convictions, and pathways to God. Every community will have learning at its core. Every community will gather together for prayer. And every community will be built around acts of loving-kindness. Homes, synagogues, and schools will now be the primary addresses for the transmission of Jewish values, replacing the holy Temple in Jerusalem. What a gutsy move! What chutzpa! He reinvented an entire religious tradition! He reoriented Judaism. That’s what Rabbi Yohanan did. That’s how you respond to a crisis.

The question *we* now have to ask is: what do we rebuild after COVID? What did we learn from COVID? What kind of synagogue do we need to be? What has this taught us about who we are? How many of us have the courage to say: “what got us here ain’t gonna get us there.” What if Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai didn’t say that the world stands on three things, but instead said: “don’t worry, stay calm, we’ll keep waiting. We’ll wait 100 years, we’ll wait 200 years, 300 years, we’ll see what happens.” We would have died as a people. We either would have assimilated completely, or we would have walked the world as a people without self-respect. The courage to say, “it has to be done differently now,” is the remarkable genius of our people. To reframe the moment as a moment of opportunity, to see that there is a rebirth of a different kind of religious conviction and imagination - that’s what it takes. I’m waiting for *our* collective imagination. I want

to see what kind of remarkable developments will come out of this past year, this catastrophe. We have come *back* in order to rebuild *anew*.

The third and final narrative comes from our mystical tradition. The mystical tradition took the narrative of exile and saw it as a metaphor for universal exile. In kabbalistic language, there are shards of evil in this world, and it is our mission to gather them up. It's not an accident and it's not a punishment that we are in exile, alienated from our true selves, that's part of our mission. We are all sent by God to redeem a *world* in exile. The experience of exile, the catastrophe of exile, is an invitation to our mission, the mission of saving the world. The question *we* must ask from our mystical tradition is: what's *our* mission now? What do we want to say to the world right now? Undoubtedly, it's a message about surviving catastrophe, about surviving trauma, about overcoming the imprisonment of trauma; it's a message of rising up and finding the light that is present in all things, the light that is hidden in this experience.

Today is Rosh Hashanah. The cry of the shofar has woken us from our slumber. This is the season of renewal. This is the moment to reframe our new year. We have survived the worst year of American Judaism, and we are still standing as a vibrant community. Now is the time to imagine what comes next. From our tradition we learn three ways to confront this crisis and renew ourselves in the year ahead. This crisis can be for us a new beginning, a cultural revolution, and redemption.

Everything that we used to think is inevitable we have learned is not inevitable. Let's reimagine what community can be, let's rethink the activities we do here, let's rethink the ways we engage with each other, let's rethink *everything* we do. COVID has given us a year and a half away and granted us a little distance. We have come to realize what we miss, what we cherish, and maybe the self-destructive patterns that were covered up by the sense of inevitability and routine. Let's create an "imagination team" to start thinking in very different ways about what Jewish life

might look like. There is so much we can do now that we never imagined was possible. I don't have a specific plan yet, but I have a lot of confidence that together we can dream big.

We certainly grieve all that was lost this past year, but we cannot and will not stop. We will not be afraid to challenge what was and imagine what could be. We will not dwell on the "is" but rather we will aspire towards the "ought." Don't ask what Jewish life is, ask what Jewish life ought to be. Don't ask what Israel is, ask what Israel ought to be. Don't talk about what this community *is*, but rather what this community *ought* to be. Going from "is" to "ought" is the great jump. That is what the prophets were able to do, that is what the rabbis were able to do, that is what the mystics were able to do, and that is what *we* will do.

Two thousand years ago I am sure Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai tore his clothes and sat with sackcloth and ashes after the Temple was destroyed. But I think there was a part of him that also saw this as an opportunity, as a chance to renew, rebuild, revive, reinterpret, reshape, and reinvent. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Av we fast, we sit on the floor, and we mourn, but it is now the day after. That was the day Rabbi Yohanan stood up and said: Let's rebuild! Let's write the new books of our tradition that we need to write. I pray that we all have the strength this year to engage in this sacred work together. Don't be afraid. Let's go do it!