

Leaving our Caves of Indifference

Of all the words that seem to encapsulate the reality we are living in right now it is: crisis. The world is in crisis. Our country is in crisis. Our environment is in crisis. WE are in crisis. We are collectively suffering from the whiplash of a pandemic, a recession, political upheaval, and a reckoning on race, all at once, for which there is no precedent. Some of us are deep under the waves of these crises. Some are barely staying afloat. Some of us have had fear harden our hearts and others have had our hearts break wide open. There is pain, there is suffering, and the tears keep flowing. All of us stand here today with an aching heart, a sore neck, a bit of a headache, and a desperate dream for our world, for our nation, and for our lives. But for too many people the answer to all the pain, the most comfortable solution to all our problems, and the reaction to the roller coaster of crises is simply...nothing. Let's just sit this one out...maybe next time...I'm too old...I'm too young...I don't care enough. We retreat into our shells like a turtle hoping the insulation will keep the noise at bay. We curl up on our couches with a warm blanket, a cup of hot tea, and we turn on Netflix or some other entertaining distraction from the world. We are in a spiritual slumber and the alarm is now sounding.

The image of sitting this one out and watching from the sideline is nothing more than a modern day remake of the famous story (BT Talmud 33b) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who abhorred the Romans for their hedonism, their irreverence, and their cruelty. He and his son, Rabbi Eliezer, could no longer live in this world of tumult and indecency. They were tired of kvetching and complaining and they desperately needed an escape. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son decide to run away and ultimately end up hiding in a cave. Here they live for twelve years as disembodied brains, only dressing in moments of prayer, otherwise living in a state of

all-consuming intellectual contemplation. They lived in a fantasy world of holy piety all the while reality around them was falling apart.

Eventually, after twelve years, the prophet Elijah stops by to inform them that the previous emperor has died, and they could leave their cave. They emerge from what the tradition seems to characterize as a paradise. While driven there by the rot of society, they find an idyllic setting apparently constructed and nurtured by God, or so they thought. Upon leaving their cave, they witness a man plowing and sowing his field, and they cry out in contempt, “They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal!” Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt to the ground. Encountering people who subsist not on holy devotion but on the toil of their labor, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son can see only the debasement of a life in which God does not consume the entire human field of vision. They lack any capacity to tolerate, much less empathize with or care for, others living in a less God-centered universe. Guided by this mindset, they set off on a path to destroy the actual universe God created.

Is this what God wants? Maybe. It was God, after all, who enabled them to live in a cave for twelve years. But instead of affirmation, God responds to them with rage. “Have you emerged to destroy My world? Return to your cave!” With this pronouncement, God clarifies that God’s primary commitment is not to the cave and all it symbolized, but to the world. After supporting them with miracles to allow for a life of uninterrupted Torah study, God proclaims that they have learned the wrong lessons, exiles them from God’s world, and promptly sends them back into their cave.

For twelve years Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son buried themselves in the sand, quarantined in the cave of indifference. From the comfort of their little cave they sat and passed judgment on the world - a world they retreated from and abdicated any responsibility to improve.

This story is a testimony to the powerful attraction, and the misguided destructiveness, of religious intoxication. Who asked this of you? God demands to know, and in the tragic irony of this question lies the germ of a very different pandemic. For in the very act of self-revelation, of making the divine presence accessible to human experience, God unleashes a spiritual virus on human beings that even God cannot control, a force that subverts God's plan for humanity while speaking in God's name. I have no doubt that we will eventually discover a vaccine for Covid-19, but from where will we find the inoculation for this spiritual pandemic?

A year and a half ago I had the opportunity to visit the Museum of the Bible in DC. If you haven't been, it's a fascinating museum, a little quirky, definitely Protestant, but full of interesting historical collections. One of the more surprising exhibits was a copy of the Slave Bible. The Slave Bible, as it would become known, was a missionary book originally published in 1807 on behalf of the Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of enslaved Africans toiling in Britain's lucrative Caribbean colonies. They used the Slave Bible to teach enslaved Africans how to read while at the same time introducing them to the Christian faith. Unlike other missionary bibles, however, the Slave Bible contained only "select parts" of the biblical text. Its publishers deliberately removed entire sections, such as the Exodus from Egypt, that could inspire hope for liberation and redemption. Instead, the publishers emphasized portions that justified and fortified the system of slavery that was vital to the British Empire. To this day we continue to witness the exploitation of religion and our sacred texts to justify terror, hatred and violence in God's name. From shooting rampages and racism to the subordination of women, the stigmatization of LGBTQ people, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. This is worse than crawling into the cave of indifference, this is abhorrent and irresponsible.

I recognize that most religious communities don't actually preach intolerance and zealotry. Frankly those are not the communities that worry me most. What worries me is everyone else, plagued with a so-called perfunctory religion. This is services without soul and practice without purpose. It was Abraham Joshua Heschel, over half a century ago that opened his monumental philosophy of Judaism with the following: "Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, and insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless" (God in Search of Man, 3). Don't get me wrong, I love ritual. I love the smell of shabbat dinner, the feeling of tefillin wrapped on my arm, and the sound of prayer on Yom Kippur. But ritual cannot come at the expense of soul and spirit. An entire generation of young people, and not so young people, feel profoundly alienated. They reject a life in the cave blinded from reality and a life outside the cave laden with incendiary judgment. They refuse to choose between a religion that is deadly and a religion that is already dead. Thus we see the rise of the most dominant religion in America: none - N.O.N.E. And yet, by all accounts, people are still hungry for connection, yearning for community, meaning, and purpose.

I have always advocated for the fact that Judaism has a long track record of providing from our resources the tools for people to live in community and to live lives of meaning and purpose. This is precisely what this and many other communities have done to reanimate the Jewish community and to breath new life into our traditions and rituals, with seriousness, creativity, and radical inclusion. And yet I think we are missing something very important. The

question is not only what does Judaism offer to create lives of meaning and purpose. We also need to ask what Judaism *demand*s of us in this moment? Who are we called to be in this time of moral upheaval as our nation is torn apart by fear and division? Who are we called to be as our planet is burning and we are asleep at the wheel? Who are we called to be when rifts between religious and secular, right and left, Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews, threaten to tear our people apart? Who are we called to be in a time of political and cultural destabilization and profound moral challenge? Forget what Judaism offers us...what does Judaism *demand* of us?

Prior to moving to Alexandria I used to live in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. This was a world of penthouse apartments, second homes in the Hamptons, doormen with white gloves, and a reality that was at times detached from reality. There were individuals with whom a conversation about moral upheaval was often met with blank stares, not because they didn't care but because this was not their lived experience. From within our caves, they would say, everything is cozy and everything is fine. We don't want people outside the cave to suffer but that's not our problem, that's not Judaism's problem, it's the City's problem. I gave a donation, they need to fix the rest.

I am not too naive to believe that we alone can solve the world's problems, our nation's problems, or even our city's problems. Our sages teach us לא עליך המלאכה לגמור - it is not incumbent upon [us] to finish the great tasks at hand. But...לא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה. - we are not free to desist from the challenges either. With time, the plague of perfunctory religion yields something far more pernicious - religious retreatism. This is religion as a diversion, as thoughts and prayers, as another moment of silence. This is religious community as insular social clubs playing bingo in lavish ballrooms. Some may think that retreating to our caves is a value neutral proposition, but it is not. By embracing a cave mentality we do little more than defend the

indefensible. Maintaining the status quo simply perpetuates oppression, degradation and humiliation, all of which thrive on willful inaction. But that's ok, right? We are only here to get close to God. So many of us are truly fortunate right now even in this time crisis and turmoil. And if you are able to be here with us on Zoom, I count you among the fortunate. But just because you are not personally at the point of breaking doesn't mean our tradition is not demanding you to open your eyes and truly see the brokenness all around us. Judaism is not an escape from reality, it is the source of strength and courage to confront and transform our reality. Judaism pulls us out of our caves and inspires us not to incinerate the world but to build this world with love and compassion.

Some of you might be thinking: Can't we just be a place to daven and enjoy kiddush? Can't we just fast in peace? Can't I just pay my dues and be left alone? I must confess, and today is a day for confessions, that all I have said has been said before. In fact it has been repeated year after year. We didn't listen then and many are not listening now. These are the words of the prophet Isaiah whose message was just shared moments ago. Isaiah offers a stinging rebuke of those who seek God in prayer and ritual while ignoring their ethical responsibility to others. The words we read today are perhaps our tradition's most direct indictment of so-called piety and are intentionally read on a day when the dominant expression is immersion in prayer and ritual fasting. "Is this the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies? Do you call that a fast? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, clothe them, and do not ignore your own kin" (Isaiah 58:5-7).

There is a pointed irony to reading a critique of institutionalized ritual within an institutionalized framework - an irony that may have been the rabbis' motivation for including it in the first place. At the height of this sacred and solemn day of fasting and prayer, they challenge us to reflect critically on what we are doing here. Isaiah's message can be summarized simply: Your prayer and fasting are worthless to me as long as there are hungry, poor, homeless, and naked people suffering just outside the walls of your religious establishment. Get out of the synagogue, get out of your house and create a society of justice! There is a tragic irony here as well in the realization that most of the Jewish community has taken the very text that critiques the ritualization of the fast and instructs us to redefine piety and we have effectively neutralized its dominant message by treating it as another holiday reading, more thoughts and prayers, another way of crawling into our cave and not seeing other people before us at all times. God pronounces God's message, God's religious priorities, in the strongest terms, but we are too busy burying ourselves in our cave to even hear God, much less to see others. Prayer and ritual means nothing if it is not responsive to the greatest moral challenges of our day.

If we can follow Isaiah's vision then our light will burst through like the dawn, illuminating the darkness all around us. Our future depends on this vision of compassion, curiosity, and courage. This is the sacred inheritance that we must discover and rediscover on this sacred day. The fast God desires is the fast of justice and human dignity, equity and equality; the fast of hope and compassion, forgiveness and healing; the fast of purpose and meaning, grace and love. The world is in crisis. Our country is in crisis. Our environment is in crisis. WE are in crisis. The question is: what are we going to do about it? We may physically be stuck in our homes but we need not bury ourselves in the sand. Judaism calls us into the world and demands that we engage with the world lest our inaction becomes the fuel that burns it all down.

Perhaps you already know how the story ends. God sends Shimon bar Yochai and his son back into their cave. The cave, which initially seemed to be heaven, is now described as hell, a punishment for the wicked who have become indifferent to God's world. After completing their sentence a heavenly voice tells them to get up and go forth. Upon leaving the cave, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's son continues to destroy with his gaze of fiery contempt. His father, however, was transformed, healing the wounds his overzealous son could not restrain himself from inflicting.

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and a Day of Transformation. We must commit to living up to the prophetic calling of Isaiah and the core tenets of our tradition. Remember, the story of our people is one of partnering with God in the holy work of liberation and redemption. It makes religious life an eternal quest for moral and spiritual change. In a world plagued with crisis, in a nation ravaged by chaos, our story elevates human dignity to the center of the divine human encounter. This story reaffirms that the only moral choice is to be a testament to what is possible, a light shining in the darkness, a source of spiritual strength, and a reminder to fight for the divine spark embedded within all of God's children. The time has come to wake up from our spiritual slumber. It is time for us to leave our caves. The heavenly voice is calling: "get up and go forth."