

Teshuva, Again 2021 **Erev Rosh Hashanah Taos 2021**

Shana Tova U'Metukah. The Hebrew word *shana* comes from the word *l'shanot*, to change. With the words Shana Tova U'Metukah, we wish each other both a sweet New Year, and a year of sweet changes. This past year, 5781 has been a year of difficult change, and we can only hope for sweeter changes in 5782.

So many images of change crowd our memories. Close your eyes for a moment and picture this scene. The central symbol of our land has been attacked by marauders. Armed with poles and clubs, they have mowed past those standing guard, climbing the walls, and smashing through windows. All that we hold sacred, the symbol of our land, has been desecrated. Those in charge of ritual and order lie on the floor, stripped of their power by an angry mob.

Or this.. Overnight, the cultural independence and basic rights of the country have been overturned. Those attempting to flee run down blocked alleyways, militia stopping them at every turn. Those who can escape wander aimlessly on the roads, no transport other than pack animals, with no haven in sight. The community leaders have fled, there is nothing but chaos and despair for those attempting to escape.

Images of the desecration of the Capital Building on January 6 2021?

Or is this the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, August 15 2021?

No, these images are of Jerusalem on the ninth day of Av, 72 CE.

Our Holy Temple, revered by Jews as the foundation stone of the world, the Holy of Holies, that holds the Ark and tablets of the

covenant, has just been burnt to the ground. *Eicha Yashva bedad*- “How lonely sits the city that was full of people!”(Lamentations 1:1)The Jews flee in all directions, engulfed by despair. Without a country, without a Temple, without a way to offer sacrifices to their God, Judaism is finished forever. It was over.

Except that it wasn't. As Rabbi Ed Feinstein, Senior Rabbi at Temple Valley Beth Shalom in Los Angeles at so eloquently put it, “The Jewish people have a genius for responding to catastrophe, for turning crisis into opportunity.”

The unthinkable had happened, and the rabbis did not miss a beat. Within a few generations, Judaism was completely revised as the religion of the Jewish people in exile. The Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Sanctuary was quickly replaced by the Beit Midrash, the House of Learning. By the year 200, the Mishnah was complete. Rabbis, rather than Temple Priests, became the leadership in exile. Animal sacrifice was replaced by Torah-study, Avodah- worship of the heart through spoken prayer, and Gemilut Chassadim- mitzvot and good deeds. “Never let a good catastrophe go to waste” is often said. By all accounts, Judaism should have perished, become a footnote in history. But it did not. Judaism, and the Jewish people, survived.

Once again, we face a millennial moment of profound and rapid change, and the essential structure of Jewish life seems due for a makeover. Report after Pew report tells us that younger Jews are reluctant to join synagogues and participate in fixed liturgy and mandated prayer services. Growing numbers of Jewish respondents report that they are “spiritual but not religious”. Yet over 80% of Jews surveyed tell us that they are proud to be Jewish. How does Judaism provide a liturgy that speaks to the heart in the 21st century? There are positive signs all around us. Synagogues have embraced a renewed emphasis on meditation,

with more opportunities for spontaneous sharing along with fixed prayer. Despite falling synagogue numbers, informal groups of shabbat and Jewish Holiday celebration proliferate. The Jewish literacy quotient of post- Holocaust American Jews has been minimal, but study groups are now thriving. Social media has made the “Beit Midrash” the “House of Study” a house without borders, as we tune into zoom classes from all over the world. Sefaria, an online Jewish library founded only seven years ago and piloted by Orthodox Jewish women(!) now has all major Jewish texts of the last 2500 years available online, all in the original and many now translated into English. Change? You are participating in this service on zoom, a Rosh Hashanah that would have been unimaginable a decade ago.

Our Jewish holiday cycle, the rhythm of Jewish life, has changed drastically since Temple times. Tisha B’Av, the holiday that mourns the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, barely receives notice as it comes during our summer “vacation” times. The harvest “High Holidays” of Temple times -Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot- were quickly replaced by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur once Jews were expelled from their land. Only Passover, the holiday that is celebrated in the home without rabbi or priest, has retained its paramount importance.

The America Jewish holiday cycle has brought formerly minor holidays to prominence while paying scant attention to others. Chanukah, a minor holiday not even mentioned in Jewish biblical sources, has grown to prominence not only as an answer to Christmas but as a celebration of light. Purim, a holiday that emphasizes drinking and dress-up, is now celebrated with great enthusiasm. I believe that the ascending holiday in American Jewish consciousness is Tu’B’shevat, a relatively minor holiday established in Rabbinic times that honors the birthday of trees. This may be the “Gift of the Jews” of our time, a holiday that asks

us to face the environment and our responsibilities to our planet while honoring the bounty we have been given.

Tikkun Olam, a relatively minor theme in Jewish text has now come to the forefront. Tikkun Olam now speaks of our responsibility as Jews to repair the world. The original Kabbalistic source refers only to “sparks” left from shattered worlds, experiments that have come before us and failed, but now Tikkun Olam, as the duty to repair our world, has become a central tenet of Liberal American Judaism.

My teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter, (z”l) often spoke of the end of the 20th century as a time of paradigm shift. Our Torah texts, taught Reb Zalman, are messages for change, if only we can adjust our perspective.

For example, each year on Rosh Hashanah (second day) we read the story of Abraham and the binding of his son Isaac. In this perplexing story, God says to Abraham,

*“Take your son , your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering... (Gen.22-1-2). Abraham obeys. And Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar of wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said Abraham, Abraham, and he said, “ Here I am-Heneni”. “Lay not your hand upon the lad, no do anything to him for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withhold your son, your only son from me.” And Abraham **lifted up his eyes** and behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son” (Gen 22: 1-13)*

I have never been comfortable with this story as one emphasizing surrender and obedience. Rather, it is the story of a fundamental change as God reaches out to establish a covenant with Abraham and his people. This covenant is no longer to include human sacrifice, prevalent in Abraham's world. Instead, animals are to be offered as "korban", sacrifice, a way to come closer to the Divine. Abraham is ordered to **Look up!** and see in a new way. No child is to be sacrificed, especially not one's own.

We may not find this satisfying, but in the ancient world, this concept was a huge leap. Almost two thousand years later, Judaism experienced a second paradigm shift. With the fall of the Temple, ritual sacrifice of animals was no longer possible. The rabbis quickly substituted Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Chassadim, study, worship of the heart and good deeds as the way to connect with the Divine.

Now, as we are again facing a moment of rapid change, swiftness is required. A time lag can be fatal.

Avraham Joshua Heschel tells the story of his experience as a seven year old boy hearing the story of the binding of Isaac.

My heart began to beat even faster; it sobbed with pity for Isaac.

"Behold Abraham lifted the knife"- My heart froze within me with fright, and I broke into tears.

"Why are you crying"? asked the teacher. You know that Isaac was not killed."

And I said to him, still weeping, "But Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?" The Rabbi comforted me by assuring me that **an angel can not come late.**

An angel cannot come late, but WE can.

We have been warned for decades of the magnitude of the climate crisis that we see unfolding around us, but we have been agonizingly slow to respond. The word “irrevocable” is now a part of the daily news feed. Is it too late to stop scores of transmuting viruses from spiraling out of control? Is it too late to stop the Arctic ice melt as huge glaciers plunge into the sea, causing the oceans to rise, inundating our shores? Is it too late to stop the conflagration of our forests, choking the planet of life-giving oxygen? Is it too late to stop the desertification of large swaths of our world, leaving large segments of humanity without water to drink or grow sustainable crops? Is it too late to prevent wholesale migration of displaced peoples? Put the knife down. Stop using the tools of the last order. Look up, before it is too late.

Faced with utter extinction, Judaism changed and survived. What, then, is the unique message of our Jewish tradition to a world now facing the same? What is the essence of the Jewish “Particular genius for turning crisis into opportunity”?

Teshuva.

According to the great teacher Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz(Z’L) the ability to do teshuva, to change and rectify our mistakes, is encoded in human beings before the creation of the world. In the words of Rabbi Steinsaltz, “By repenting, we can extricate ourselves from the binding web of our lives, from the chain of causality that otherwise compels us to follow a path of no return”. Just as Abraham was able to hear the angel’s call, look up and perceive a new reality, so we too are created with an inherent ability to look up, change our perspective ,and revise our actions accordingly.

Tonight is Erev Rosh Hashanah, the start of Judaism's Ten Days of Repentance. The Jewish concept of teshuva, the core of these ten days, can provide a model of survival for our planet in this time of crisis. Judaism teaches that humanity can "extricate itself from a path of no return", but first, we must acknowledge our mistakes and change our habits, from consumption of meat to the use of fossil fuels. We must apologize to the next generation, and to the species that remain, and then -change course. Swift, responsive change, Jewish history has shown us, is possible. Extinction is not inevitable.

An angel never comes late, but human beings, often do. Some of the damage done to our planet, such as the poisoning of our seas and the destruction of our forests, may truly be irrevocable, and we will need to adapt accordingly. The moment for tikkun olam, to repair the world, is NOW. As one united human race we must stop, look up, and see what we have not seen until now. Put down the knife. It is not *yet* too late.

Shana Tova, U'metukah

May we all have a year of sweet and positive change.

