

On Rosh HaShana the verdict is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

These are the disquieting, almost chilling words of the U'netaneh Tokef, the emblematic liturgy of the High Holidays which begins the Musaph service. In the vision painted by this powerful prayer narrative, in fear and trembling all that lives passes before God for review and dispensation. The book of remembrance is opened and our own deeds bear witness. Who will live and who will die, who by fire, who by water, who in his time, who before his time, who will be at peace and who will suffer, who will prosper and who become impoverished- all decided, all in the unfathomable hands of heaven.

In these times of nearly daily upheaval, it seems easy to feel helpless. The very fabric of our economy seems to be in danger of unraveling and great, shadowy poorly understood forces roll and churn about us, threatening to overturn the world. Who will rest and who will wander, who will have rest and who will be torn asunder, who will be brought down and who lifted up...

But Judaism is a path of human empowerment, not fatalism. One of the great Rabbis of the Talmud, Rabbi Chiya, who lived in the second century in Tiberias, struggled to make a living. He asked his wife to be sure to give every beggar who came to their door a loaf of bread before even being asked. "Do this, so that if your son ever has to do the same, he will be shown mercy as you show mercy."

"Are you cursing our son to poverty?" demanded his wife.

"No," answered Rabbi Chiya, "but livelihood and poverty is a great wheel in the world, forever turning."

A great wheel in the world- times of plenty, times of scarcity. Judaism is less concerned about the nature of booms and busts than about how to respond to the great and mighty challenges of livelihood in uncertain times with integrity, with faith, with activism and with caring. Rabbi Chiya and his wife invest in Tzedakah, in helping those in need in their community firstly because they understand that we are all interconnected, that boundaries and distinctions are mostly illusions, and that we are all responsible for creating a society based on compassion, sensitivity and responsiveness. Rabbi Chiya and his wife invest in Tzedaka out of an awareness that their children will live in the world whose moral climate that their parents have created. The wheel turns in the world- now rising, now falling, but what ultimately matters is how we respond to change- do we

contract and limit our concerns to ourselves out of fear, or do we expand them to our community out of faith?

There is a story that I heard when I lived on Cape Cod. Low tide in Brewster, a town on the upper cape. A little girl is wandering down a stretch of beach, turning over horseshoe crabs stranded upside down on the sand and tossing them gently back into the surf. “There are miles of beaches and thousands of stranded crabs,” a man who is watching tells her. “What you’re doing won’t really make a difference.” “It makes a difference to *these* crabs,” responds the little girl.

The power of empowerment, of making a difference where you stand, where you are is one of Jewish civilization’s most profound innovations. It’s not all about the past; the verdict, the consequences of what we’ve done and been up to now is not the etched in stone finality.

The U’netaneh Tokef concludes like this: U’teshuva, U’tefila U’tzedakah ma’avirin et Roah HaGezeirah. Repentance, Prayer and Tzedakah can alleviate the severity of the decree. The narrative is ours to relate, the story ours to tell. Not always can we affect courses or outcomes but meaning- that’s something else entirely. Judaism offers a unique path to meaning, to creating- or completing the creation of a world based on not what is, but what could be, what should be. God has implanted within us a vision of peace, justice and compassion? Were these visions put there only so we could rage that the world does not seem to reflect these values- or so that we can, in partnership with God, make those holy values real. Do you see injustice? Then know that God has placed you here to establish justice? Are you haunted by a world marred by indifference? Then you know that your mission in the world is to create caring. The place of darkness holds the key to light.

But you, the community of HaTikvah, know this already. The search for personal meaning, for personal transformation, for making a difference leads us back to each other. This Kehillah K’dosha, this holy community is a place of Jewish empowerment, of personal empowerment and discovery. So many of our community have seen it as just that.

A few years back, a book came out called “Everything I needed to know, I learned in Kindergarten.” For me, I could write a sequel: “everything I needed to know, I learned from my congregation.”

I have learned from you your deep commitment to your heritage in those moments when it counts the most. I have met you and you have allowed me to walk with you in times of joy and times of sorrow, of birth and of death. You have shown me the depth of your caring in those moments for those you love and your concern that that love be expressed in the language of Judaism; that the observance of Shiva and the celebration of a Brit, that the deepest expressions of sorrow and joy are expressed in Hebrew, your ancient language of the soul; that the rituals and benchmarks used to frame the most profound joy or sorrow of the heart are those of our people- that although the vessels you use to contain the moments of your life may come from many places and reflect many backgrounds, the well water of meaning is drawn from Be'er Mayim Chaim, the Well of Living Waters of the Jewish heritage.

I have learned to be led by you. This Jewish community is literally a field of dreams: a place to meet together; to explore, discuss and discover. When a congregant came to me and asked about learning Hebrew, our Jewish empowerment class, now beginning its third year, was launched. When someone mentioned after services that they'd like to have an opportunity to daven during the week with Tefilin, the Tie One On Minyan was born. A member of the shul expressed the importance of Tikun Olam, of giving back- and monthly visits to a local nursing home, Tzedakah projects and an annual Mitzvah day of social action was the result. Several members expressed interest in going to Israel and lo and behold, a committee organizing a trip to Israel is forming. Several post Bar/Bat Mitzvah students told me that they wanted an opportunity to continue to learn and grow Jewishly and our bi-monthly Minyanaire program, where these students lead services in the main sanctuary and take part in special age-appropriate projects and activities took shape. A book club, Havdalah celebrations, online education and so many other initiatives have begun in just this way. And these are just a few examples of the ways that this synagogue as a community dedicated to the spiritual growth of every one of its members has become a place of self-actualization, a personal place of Jewish empowerment.

I have learned to appreciate your dedication to family in all of its meanings; I have learned about inclusion that extends to interfaith families, to Jews of different backgrounds, sexual orientations, degrees of observance and education. I have learned of your dedication to Eretz Yisrael, the State of Israel and to the welfare of the general community, to the universalist

message of Judaism which proclaims that all humanity is created in God's image, that we are all brothers and sisters, all subject to the same moral law of the heart, all standing in the presence of the One God, parent to us all.

I have learned also that there is a great thirst for expressing Jewish identity; one small step at a time. That the things that matter most to us need to be made manifest through ritual and symbol so that they can infuse our lives more strongly, more consciously. We want our homes to be sanctuaries of amity, support and affirmation. Let us mark that will with the Mezuzah, a gateway to the Jewish home that both welcomes and demarcates: that encourages those entering to leave stress and anger and the pressures of the outside at the door.

We want to create a structure of time for family and ourselves in the midst of lives of preoccupation and stricture. Let us mark that desire with the Shabbat candles, with a day dedicated to spirit, to relaxation, to togetherness. If it can't be a day, let it be part of a day- and if not that, then a nice Shabbat dinner we enjoy together. We want to create a sense of purpose in our lives, of living for something beyond the moment: let us make that desire manifest through consciously giving Tzedakah and social action and involving our children in deciding where our donations go so that they may learn to value that which we value.

The Jewish home, the Jewish table, the synagogue; these are places that transcend the wheel that turns in the world. They are places infused with the encounter with each other and that Presence which we find when we reach out into ourselves, beyond ourselves; the Shechinah, the presence of the Living God.

Our Rabbis are pragmatists. Rabbi Elazar says: if there is no flour, there is no Torah, and if there is no Torah, there is no flour.

The Talmud says that Mar Ukbah and his wife used to make anonymous donations to a family who refused to accept Tzedaka, although their need was great. Accordingly, Mar Ukbah and his wife would carefully toss the donations through a small opening in the door of the family's apartment. One day, as they did so, the father of the family unexpectedly opened the door. To avoid shaming the family, Mar Ukbah and his spouse ran through the streets of Tiberias and ducked into a large furnace used to heat a bread

oven. Fortunately, the furnace had been cleaned and the burning ashes swept out. But the floor was still hot. Mar Ukba's feet were burned. "Here, stand on my feet," said his wife, and Mar Ukba did so until the man had passed by. When they reached home, he appeared downcast. His wife asked what was wrong.

"Your feet were not burned by the furnace," he confided. "You have merited some kind of protection that I do not. Your righteousness must be greater than mine, even though I spend the entire day engaged in Torah and teaching!"

"Perhaps it's because I am engaged in supervising our home," said his wife gently. "When a person in need comes by, I am able to provide for him more directly and quickly. While you may need to alert Tzedakah agents and request donations, I can simply go to the pantry and fetch a loaf of bread. Perhaps that is why I have been provided this protection."

But surely there is a more naturalistic explanation: Perhaps Mar Ukba's wife's feet were simply more calloused from activity than her husband's who spent his days seated in the Beit Midrash, the house of study, and she was thus able to stand on the hot surface? Wouldn't the Talmudic narrative voice know this? Perhaps the message is this: it is when we occupy ourselves with Torah and flour both- or rather, when our occupation with flour becomes infused with Torah values of compassion and connection that we merit protection- the ability to hold fast in times of discomfort and difficulty.

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh; all of the people Israel are involved with each other- despite the message that we hear of our powerlessness in the face of great forces, the power of involvement, of a smile, of one Mitzvah is even greater; it can change the world.

L'Shana Tova!