L’shana Tova and Shabbat Shalom

Friends, as President John F. Kennedy said in 1963, “For time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past and present are certain to miss the future.” It is true, time and the world do not stand still, and that change is the law of life. But change is also scary especially when one feels out of control as so many of us do today. The pandemic has only exacerbated a feeling that the world is spinning ever faster, leaving many of us lost and struggling to find our place in it. For many of us, our understanding of the world and how the world works doesn’t make sense any more.

Societal norms are changing at an ever rapid rate. Some changes are disconcerting, while others are very much long overdue. Long suffering peoples are finding their voices and are insisting on having a seat at the table. Historically oppressed minorities are crying out and demanding action from our better selves in greater numbers. Yet their passions can leave also us leave us feeling lost as ancient hatreds sometimes rise out of their frustrations as well. We want to be agents of change, but also stay true to our beliefs. Sadly, in some ways this is becoming so much harder to do so.

We can believe in the men and women in blue and yet be greatly distressed by the significant disparity in how minorities all too often suffer at their hands without accountability. We can believe that black lives matter, but also be frustrated when our outreach at partnership is rebuffed with antisemitic tropes. We can believe in women’s equality and in the just cause of supporting members of the LGBTQ community and yet be outraged when some of their leaders demand, through false applications of intersectionality, that we must somehow renounce our love of Israel or our own Jewishness in order to be a full member of the cause. And we can love being Jewish, but also be frustrated when fellow members of the tribe act in ways that make it difficult to live our most fully Jewish authentic selves, especially in our beloved Rockland County. All of these can be true, and because of all of these issues, as Jews in today’s world, it is easy to for us to feel lost.

All that being said, even amidst all of this turmoil, we gather together, once again, this fall, albeit virtually, to once again proclaim our rededication to best selves and to our heritage. Yes, we are missing seeing our friends and family in person. We are missing the close warmth embrace of community. Through it all, we can hopefully sense at least a taste of the eternal nature of our heritage. A heritage that has seen more than most, and though battered and bruised at times, has continued to tell the tale.

As Rabbi Baruch HaLevi wrote over a decade ago, “Every generation sees itself as unique. No other generation before us has faced our particular challenges, problems or crisis, so the thinking goes. And though each and every era has it’s unique set of circumstances to be sure, crisis has existed in each and every era. Or in the words of Admiral William Crowe, “in times like these you can be assured that there have always been times like these.”

Bottom of Form

Two thousand years ago a crisis befell the Jewish people far worse than any of our modern Jewish communal crisis’, no matter how bad they might seem. And two thousand years ago we faced the crisis and turned it into an opportunity thanks to great leaders and spirits like Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai. (that can be found) in our siddur as part of our daily prayers the following:

*Once, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was walking with his disciple, Rabbi Yehoshua, near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Yehoshua looked at the Temple ruins and said:  “Oy for us! The place that atoned for the sins of the people Israel – through the ritual of animal sacrifice – lies in ruins!”  Then Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: “Do not be devastated, my son. There is another equally meritorious way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We can still gain atonement through deeds of loving kindness.” For it is written: “Loving kindness I desire, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6).*”[[1]](#footnote-1)

These were the words of our prophet Hosea. We do not know much about the life of Hosea. What we do know is that he lived in the 8th Century BCE in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Hosea, referred to by the Talmud as the greatest prophet of his generation[[2]](#footnote-2) prophesized for some sixty years. He did this while bearing witness to one of the greatest transformational moments of Jewish history which was the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

Even in the face of this unbearable carnage, Hosea was able to state, “Loving kindness I desire, not sacrifice.” The words of Hosea still ring true to this very day. Amidst the greatest transformational catastrophe to face the Jewish people until the 20th Century, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai uttered these same words once again while looking at the devastation of a Jerusalem decimated by the Romans in 70 CE, Judaism became changed by this simple phrase, Loving kindness I desire, not sacrifice.

The rabbis took our tradition and made it into one action out of the ashes of the sacrificial cult. No longer was it about what one did inside the *Beit HaMikdash*, The Temple in Jerusalem, it instead became about what one did outside of its walls.

Judaism became a tradition never intended to be one left on the sidelines. Yes it is very much about the life of the heart and the spirit and the soul, but it is also about the life of deeds and actions as well. We define ourselves not just by our lineage but also by the impact our conduct has on our families, friends and greater communities. In times of great turmoil it is all the more important that these acts be tacts of loving kindness and acts of justice.

Even as the world is more rapidly changing, and it is becoming easier and easier to feel lost in the maelstrom of all that surrounds us in this whirlwind of life; the eternal, steadfast nature of our tradition can both hold true and be our guide.

What our tradition is telling us is that we cannot let ancient hatreds resurfaced to paralyze us. We cannot allow our preconceived notions of justice to prevent us from acting justly. We cannot allow our voices to be silent when there is suffering in the world. And we cannot become disengaged and disaffected from the Jewish world simply because a pandemic can make it harder and more challenging to feel connected.

The URJ website has a list of twenty-five things to do while under quarantine.[[3]](#footnote-3) I won’t enumerate all of them here, but they include such recommendations as “watch a Jewishly themed TV show. Get more comfortable talking to God. Call your mother (or your father, or your children or grandchildren). Bake a challah. Advocate for social justice. (Join us for Shabbat). Do a mitzvah.”

Do a mitzvah … “Loving kindness I desire, not sacrifice.” Perhaps then, even amidst all uncertainty facing us wrought not just by the pandemic, but also by increasing societal unrest and culture change, the way we can steady ourselves is to be a rock amidst the waves. Yes we may be battered by the seas, but the waters will splash over us.

This notion has been illustrated perhaps most powerfully in a story gathered by Arthur B. Shostak, a retired Drexel University Sociology professor, who wrote a book Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust.

Dr. Shostak tells the story of “… survivor Ruth Kluger. In 1942, when she was just 12 years old, Ruth was a minute or two away from being casually commanded by an SS officer to join a line of nude females to soon die of asphyxiation in a KZ Auschwitz gas chamber. Instead she found herself suddenly confronted by a prisoner in her early 20’s who had long before been ordered to serve as a “Selection” Recording Clerk.

By softly but firmly telling Ruth to lie about her age and claim she was 15 years old the Jewish Clerk helped save Ruth’s life. When the SS Officer decided the emaciated “15 years old” was just too thin and small to continue to live, the Clerk boldly spoke up and called his attention to Ruth’s strong legs as proof the girl would make a good slave laborer. With total indifference the Officer casually changed his mind – and motioned Ruth over to the line of those females who could struggle to live as slave laborers.

In her memoir Ruth regards the incident as “*an incomprehensible act of grace, or put more modestly, a good deed … I was saved by a young women who was in as helpless a situation as the rest of us, and who nevertheless wanted nothing more than to help me* …” She sees in this proof that “*even in the perverse environment of Auschwitz absolute goodness was a possibility, like a leap of faith, beyond the humdrum chain of cause and effect*. *I don’t know how often it was consummated. Surely not often. Surely not only in my case. But it existed. I am a witness.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

We can steady ourselves through acts of loving kindness grounded in our tradition, even in the most challenging of times. These may be big actions like joining protests for racial justice and fighting for voting rights or fighting for the strangers in our midst, or fighting for climate justice or equal rights, or all of the above. Or they may be small acts like showing caring and concern for an elderly neighbor or sending a comforting meal to one who is ill and ailing or comforting the bereaved or calling and checking on someone who is lonely or isolated.

We are most certainly living in moments now that demand more of us than perhaps in recent memory. Are we ready to act in ways of loving kindness? This is our call to action. If Hosea could do this while witnessing the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians in 722; if Yochanan ben Zakkai could do this in the ashes of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE; if that recording clerk could do in the offices of Auschwitz, so too we can do it even in the climate of social upheaval and pandemics. And so too, we must also act in ways of loving kindness. For, do we wish for the world to transform around us, or because of us?

Let’s not let the overwhelming nature of today’s disconcerting world make us more afraid. To borrow from Thomas Paine, “these may be the times that tries a person’s soul,” but as Paine went on to say, “yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

May we one day and soon be victorious over all that ails us and ails the world, so that all can live lives filled with loving kindness. But until that day, may we find strength and comfort in each other and in our heritage and tradition. For the steadfast nature of Judaism can help guide our way even in the darkest and most challenging of days.

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1. https://www.jewishboston.com/one-people-one-heart-series-4-there-is-another-way/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pesachim 87a [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://reformjudaism.org/25-jewish-things-do-under-quarantine [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.stealthaltruism.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)