

Inner Light
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780
September 29, 2019

A Jewish comic opens her routine with some light humor about a heavy topic. “So why,” she asks, “why do we call them the High Holy Days? Because people see each other on Rosh Hashanah, and they say ‘Hi, how are you? What’s it been, a year?’”

So this is, for most of the Jewish world, the great communal moment. This is the time we gather, we come together, almost all of us, as one. An NPR story, on Morning Edition two days ago, said this too, so it must be true.

But the comedian’s remark – with its snark – may miss the mark for us, in the Virgin Islands. First, this is hardly high season, here. Two years ago, we almost could not come together at all. We just met a storm named Maria. Only after curfew and confusion, huddled apart in homes on Erev Rosh Hashanah, turned back by police the next day, somehow, the few, the proud and the soaked managed to assemble and observe... the Second Day.

But even spared a storm, often, these are months when many remain away. For us, the sense of looking around and thinking “hey, everyone’s here” comes closer to Chanukah, or possibly Pesach.

But, actually, even then... as a tourist destination, and with so many based here often traveling between communities, even those moments may... miss the feel of the totally full house, of everyone who should be here, being present all at once.

But there is more, now. There is something else going on. There is, it seems to me, a mood here we need to admit, and expose and try to address.

We dropped our daughter at college exactly a month ago. She is a first year student at Bryn Mawr; our middle son is just down the road, a senior at Haverford. They are small liberal arts colleges, a mile apart, linked in history and ideology, with extensive cooperation between them, both founded by the Society of Friends, the Quakers.

Though formal affiliation faded, a palpable influence remains. This is usually very positive. But it is also a source of some humor, or at least attempted amusement. I remember a soccer match between Haverford and Swarthmore, where a group of students, in one cheer, took aim at two Quaker traditions: pacifism, and the notion of looking inward for insight and guidance. They encouraged the athletes by chanting: "Go, fight, Inner Light!"

My friends, as we gather together here for the New Year of 5780, there is, I think, a lingering darkness in paradise. I expected... I thought this would have lifted by now. But recovery takes time, and the dawn of tomorrow, the birth of something new, arrival at a new place... that still feels, to me, a bit like a distant shore.

A friend wrote a note last week. He owned up to breaking down, after laying out yet another blue tarp, on a home whose permanent roof is missing still. While we were away a sudden shift in a storm supposed to pass 100

miles to the south, took even the most experienced among us by surprise. I saw real shock in people's eyes on our return.

Jerry and Karen may be par for the course... although probably using a golf metaphor stings for some of you. But with decisions not getting made, huge properties in limbo, hotels still not fully open, beloved businesses closed, with constant and confusing construction altering routes and routine, with the departure of friends and those who have tried then gone away, there is more going on here, I think, than stoic acceptance or weary resignation. It's not just frustration, a sense of being on hold, in a kind of suspended animation, but something more.

Maybe I am wrong, too new to read this right, but it feels like PTSD to me. And, with over 80 power outages in the past year, dozens in the past month... even those who are from here are fed up... and even for those with generators or Tesla batteries it is too often true that we have to rely on Quaker wisdom and look... for light within. The inner light.

Do you know what used to be called a Jewish telegram? Today, I guess, it would be a "tweet." It goes like this: "Start worrying. Details to follow." Whatever inspiration I find from the Society of Friends, it occurs to me that there is something authentically Jewish about anxiety at this time of the year.

The late Alan Lew points this out, in an important book called *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. Lew reminds us that “in ancient Israel, the seventh month of the year was an anxious time. All the other civilizations of the ancient Near East were sustained by great rivers. Egyptians had the Nile, Babylonians had the Tigris and Euphrates, but Israel was completely dependent on rain. The rains came in the eighth month. So the seventh month was a time when the nation of Israel felt its life hanging in the balance.”

For them, it was not enough water. For us, maybe we worry about too much, or water out of control, going where it is not wanted or meant to be. But somehow it seems there are moments when opposites attract, when worlds apart open themselves up to one another: light and dark, wet and dry, sun and cloud, safety and danger, comfort and concern, anxiety and security, yesterday and tomorrow, even, indeed, life and death.

This night, a turning of time, a change of calendar, this season is one such occasion. And if we step into it with enough openness... the hope is that we can step out on the other side changed, determined, and, somehow, perhaps, more secure.

So how can we face an almost nameless dread, an amorphous fear, an underlying unease, and emerge in a better place? Each of you, many with years, decades, a lifetime here, have your own wisdom, your own way of being on this rock in the water.

I wish I had some magic rod, some formula to recite or ritual to perform which would make all of us feel better, right away. I don't. And I don't believe in an instant fix; if there were such a thing it would have been packaged and put on sale, probably at a marked up price, long ago.

But into this collectively held breath, in the heat and heavy, hanging air, I do have something to say. In an endless sea of choices, advice columns and self-help books and TED talks, for me, for now, I find three things which work, which can sometimes bring me to a better place.

First, I think it helps to open our eyes, to widen our vision in time and space. We are not the first to face adversity, here, or in the long history of our people, whether the storms of the season or the vagaries of fortune and the flames of hate.

Second, I think there are many settings where things just don't go as planned very often. To know that, to live with that, to thrive despite it means adaptability, and flexibility. And this can be learned, earned, grown into.

And, finally, I think there are things we can do, in our lives and world, which can bring health and hope to others, and to ourselves.

Memory, and perspective. As the Israelis say, "we have seen this movie before." It helps, a bit, to know the history of what our island home has faced, and pulled through, the ways it has rebuilt and rebounded, even if the water is warmer now and the storms come more quickly.

But as Jews, too... How much have we been through? How many times have we had to rebuild? If ever there were a people who know the strength that comes from being stubborn, insistent, persistent, it is us.

Even the story of our own synagogue is one of rebuilding, resilience and determination. We cannot tell our tale without invoking almost a dozen different countries: Spain and Portugal, Brazil and the Caribbean, England and France, Denmark and the United States. We were set back by fire once, twice, three times until we established what you now see, with strength to withstand the wind and a beauty and comfort open to all. Our scrolls come from all over the world, some centuries old, one representing the Sephardic tradition even if it is fairly new to us – and two we have had all along, saved from the final fire, before this space was built.

The journeys and challenges of the past are not just about where we came from, and who we were. They are part of who we are, as we come together today, and look towards tomorrow.

For perspective, by the way, humor helps a little, too... Have you been to Raw, the Sushi restaurant in Red Hook. Did you see what they have at the bottom of the menu? It is an item which is not... Well, it's called a WAPA roll. And it says, underneath the name: "don't even ask. It's always out."

Flexibility. A friend and colleague has an observation he shares with... some frequency, in reference to Israel. He calls Israel "*eretz... lo bid'yuk.*" It means: "the land of....not exactly."

He might as well be talking about us here. I am still surprised - or thrown - by how often things just... don't go as expected.

It is not uniquely an island experience, of course. Every soldier hears, and learns, that even the best battle plan is obsolete the moment the first shot is fired. Other people have an annoying habit of... not doing what we expect them to do. So one of the greatest of life skills, in fact, is the ability to adapt, to plan but be prepared for changes. To be flexible.

This is... well, it's either easier said than done, or it is comes more naturally to some than others.

I always thought of myself as being somewhat... nimble. There were few situations I faced, whether at services, while teaching, in public, or in other settings, to which I was not able to respond with warmth, with what I thought of us humor, and, most importantly, in a way which, I hope, made most people more comfortable. I was quite proud of being quick on my feet.

Beware of misplaced pride! Maybe I've learned my lesson by now.

Last Yom Kippur, after so many other challenges, emergencies, last minute changes, problems at the morning service (and yes, frankly, to me, astonishingly low attendance)... finally, we reach the heart of Yizkor, emotions

build, we catch a wave of energy... and the power goes out again. The generator comes on... and it is so loud no one can hear a thing.

I did the best I could, I thought. Although, not really. We rushed, we cut, we ended early. To lose this powerful, emotional, uplifting end to the holiest day of the year... to have that happen two years in a row... in my whole time as a rabbi I think I was more thrown by that than anything else.

It was... one of my greatest mistakes. I put the details, the ritual, the procedure ahead of being with people. I put rules ahead of relationships, acting stuff out on a stage, instead of living what the words mean. But most of all I felt frozen, so trapped by the “ought” that I could not be with the “is.”

Have you ever felt overwhelmed? Have you ever just had too much on your plate, or been pulled in too many directions at once? Or have you had something you planned for ages, mapped out, looked forward to just not go the way it was meant to go? Or even not live up to what you thought it would be?

Plan B is not enough. Sometimes, to be prepared, to be really ready for what we face, we need cascading contingencies. Plans C, D and E. And Plan F is not to have a plan at all! We learn to turn lemons into lemonade.

Do you remember the story of the Chasid, with a small house, and many children? Overwhelmed, overcrowded, he goes to consult his rebbe. “Master,” he says, “my house is too small, there is not enough space, it is too crowded.” The rebbe instructs him to bring into his home... a dog. The following week

things are no better; the man returns to the rebbe, and complains again. The rebbe instructs him to get... a cat. And then: move the goat inside. And then: the cow. Finally, desperate, the man goes back to the rebbe, crying that he is at his wit's end. The rebbe looks at him and says: "Of course you are! Your house is too crowded! Get rid of the goat and the cow and the dog and the cat!"

Sometimes, perhaps, flexibility can come... just from learning to see our life in a new way.

To bring light, into dark and difficult times. Memory and perspective. Preparation and flexibility. And... the best remedy. To act. To do something. At times when the world seems broken, when we might feel broken... fix it.

Wherever you live, if your eyes are open, problems are easy to see. But it is also true... the heroes are easy to find.

Want to say things about WAPA that our parents taught us never to say out loud. Instead of cursing, one of our members is busy putting dark slabs of glassy panels onto roofs, catching rays, and literally bringing light to life. See all that plastic lying around, or, if you are from the mainland, not sure what to do with items which we are used to easily placing into clearly-marked category-differentiated blue bins? Others here have worked to clean streets, clear beaches, reuse refuse and recycle paper and plastic and metal.

See children not having things that they need? We have supported a school, adopted families, made sure that teachers had basic supplies and material. Need medical or dental care? Every medical professional I met here has given so much time, over time, back to the community, in clinics or classes or peer support. As most of you know, we organized five distributions of food, medicine, solar operated items, mosquito zappers, water purification systems – and over a hundred generators – in the neediest of places, in the weeks after Irma and Maria. Not long ago, I stood with several of you, here, in a rally on behalf of immigrants, and against tearing families apart. Others who are here tonight have devoted time and talent to downtown revitalization, preservation of Magens Bay, or significantly deepening cultural offerings here, bringing films and musicians and more to this far flung shore.

These are just some of the efforts I know about, which is in turn just a small part of what those around us give to make this community a better place. It is not just that so many on the island, including those who are not Jewish, point to this place with pride and refer to it as “our synagogue.” It is that those of us, here, have connected with every aspect of this island, and called it our home. We did, we do, we will continue to play a significant role, making this place more open, more fair, more modern, more functional, and more just, engaging with all the pressing issues and moral work to be done in our midst. In the title of the award for social justice involvement by our Reform movement of Judaism, we have been and must yet be “bearers of light.”

Two days from now, on Tuesday, October 1, a few blocks from here, the legislature is holding an open hearing on WAPA. Now, that is the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, and I hope many of you join us for brunch and sharing at the home of Dorothy and Mark Isaacs that morning. But I am sure the hearings will not be done by noon. And it is... something specific... we can do, in our own way, to lend our voice, to share our presence, to act...to bring light into our world. It is one major model of change: vocalize, organize, stand and demand... something better.

And, because the Day of Atonement is a time not only of looking back, but also dedication, determination, and setting a new course, I am hoping to offer, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, a mid-day, 2 pm panel, with members of the community, called Visions of Tomorrow: Next Steps for the Virgin Islands.

In summary, then, my prescription for tonight, aimed at least as much at myself as anyone else, is this: P.F.A. Perspective. Flexibility. Action.

There is an argument in some circles about what would be... the 614th commandment. One philosopher says it is that we shall not, in our choices and our actions, it is forbidden to give Hitler a posthumous victory, that we must find some way to remain Jews, to keep the Jewish story alive in the next generation. No, the 614th commandment, a caterer says, is that “thou shalt have no Jewish function without food.” Or, in some abstract compromise,

perhaps combining anticipation of dessert with an ongoing identity... the 614th commandment is a form of *HaTikvah*, some would say.. the Israeli anthem. It is forbidden, some would say, for a Jew to give up hope.

And, slowly... very slowly but still, now... new places are beginning to open. And new faces are starting to appear.

It is Erev Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new year. It is time to be honest about our anxiety, to face our fear... and to find, in each other and ourselves, a new hope, for a better day, about to come, in all of our lives.

L'shanah Tovah.