

**The Third Day:
Things Happened for a Reason
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783
September 26, 2022**

Boker Tov. Good morning. And Shanah Tovah. A “good year,” we wish to one another, at the outset of these High Holy Days.

“Why do we call it the High Holy Days?” asks one Jewish comedian. “Because,” she says, “people go up to each other and say ‘Hi, how are you? What’s it been – a year?’”

Once, I thought that was a little bit funny. (A little.) Now, though... now the experience of not seeing each other for a long-time really hits home.

For we have been apart these past few years -- too often neither by chance nor choice. And when we were together? Sometimes it was hard even to say hello, to speak audibly, to see clearly or even recognize one another.

A story. Two Jews, Moishe and Itzik, are out for a walk in a Eastern European forest near their homes. All of a sudden, up ahead on the path, they see two big, tough-looking local guys, headed towards them. Moishe panics and turns to his friend. “Itzik, what should we do?” he asks. “There’s two of them, and we’re all alone.”

There has been loneliness these past few years – feeling separated and apart, even, ironically, as we faced a common threat.

How are you? How are you, really, after all we have been through? How are the teachers, the nurses? The parents, the kids? Are we okay?

What are we to make of this experience? How do we process the pandemic? Where does it fit in the story of our lives, our hopes, our vision – and our values? And, to be blunt: what's God got to do with it?

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי נִשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק

“And on the third day,” we hear in the Torah portion for Rosh Hashanah, “Abraham lifted up his eyes, and he beheld the place from afar.”

The third day. Maybe, perhaps, possibly... we are at the third day, the third stage of what we have gone through.

The first was basic needs: protection and detection, closings, the rude realization that we are not “essential” – or the risky reality that, yes, in fact, we are. The first day was shock at a world drastically changed, a sudden but too-fleeting sense of being all in this together.

The second day? That was settling down or acting out. It was devotion or dissent; vaccination or vacillation. Along with our own stance came justification, judgement, pointing fingers. Anyone less cautious than us is reckless and rude, careless and without compassion. Anyone more careful is a hysterical hypochondriac. Maybe they just want to stay home. Maybe they even *like* wearing masks (said no one, ever).

My own sense is that there has been a kind of hunkering, a contraction for many of us -- retreat from grappling with larger issues and ideas as we focus on the immediate and every day.

What, then, is the third day? “Abraham lifted up his eyes, and he beheld the place, from afar.” Where will we, when will we, how will we – indeed, will we reemerge, reengage, reconnect? Maybe with the third day comes a bit of distance, looking back, and taking stock. What Victor Frankel understood as our human quest for order, a framework, a way of understanding the world.

This, then, is the theme I want to explore with you this morning. How do we see what we have been through? How do we make meaning out of mayhem – and who, or what, can help us do that?

How many times over the past few years have we heard some version of religion wrangled to ratify whatever someone wanted to do in the first place? At the outset, too often, a superficial faith was a shield to wield in defiance of science: people crammed in churches in close quarters and loudly proclaim that the blood of their Savior will protect them. Swamped synagogues rebelled against restrictions, treating the commandment to come together as more important than common sense despite centuries of teaching that saving lives comes above almost any other consideration.

And then there were prayers of a particular kind. Survivors or the untouched and unaffected thank God for sparing them. Thanks to be alive.

Look, I'm in the God business. I am all in favor of praising God and being thankful for the blessing of life. But think about it. What are we saying here?

Imagine – and this really happens -- you're caught in traffic and miss a flight. You're frustrated, upset – then you hear that the plane crashed, with no survivors. It's only human, it's normal and natural to thank God for sparing you. *But what does that say about God?* Where was God, for everyone else?

I remember a hurricane. No, not the two Cat 5s which hit us head on shortly after our move to St Thomas. I mean earlier. Katrina. I remember... well, I hesitate to call them colleagues... But I remember Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, commanding the storm to go in a different direction... then telling us why it did not. The storm hit, they said... because of liberals, and lesbians.

The thing is... as classical religious rhetoric goes, they were making... a very common claim. That everything happens for a reason. They just went a step further. They claimed to know... what those reasons are.

Let's go a bit further back. Let's remember 9/11. Because Falwell, well, he had a lot to say then, too.

“The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this. Throwing God out...of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this, because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”

Isn't it nice, to be so sure? To have a direct line? You don't waste time in therapy when you *know* that everything – and *anything* – you do is right!

But what is the consequence of this level of certitude? People who are *that* sure of themselves don't have any room for doubt when they blow up buildings and topple towers and slaughter civilians in the service of their cause.

Maybe this is the *real* reason we read the *Akedah* on Rosh Hashanah morning. It is a warning against certainty, against acting on what you *think* you hear from heaven, what you are so sure God wants you to do.

But there is even more of problem with these proclamations of cause and effect, these claims to know why God acts in the world. It's an easy out. It explains a lot. It may even be a source of comfort. But-- flying against traditional assumptions - **I just don't believe that God micromanages the universe.**

With the pandemic... possibly... partly behind us, as we begin to wonder about a new normal and seek some perspective on what we have gone through, I would like to tackle this topic through a great scene from a bad movie.

Quality aside, I actually kind of enjoyed *Independence Day*. (The first one; why anyone ever made a sequel is beyond me.) People panic, arsenals are impotent, the world is about to be blown to bits. But in walks a character played by Judd Hirsch, and you just feel better. It's Judd Hirsch!

In the movie, his wife had died years ago. Hirsch's character was angry, bitter -- and mad at God. A once religious man, he had not set foot in a synagogue in twenty years.

But a crisis comes, and the stakes are high. For the world has been invaded by aliens. *Ugly* aliens, who drip green slime and take over minds and threaten humanity.

Hirsch's son, played by Jeff Goldblum, gets set to fly off on a last, desperate mission to save the world. As he leaves, he hands his father an old *siddur*, and a yellowed, stained *tallit*. Hirsch motions for everyone to gather around. One man resists, on the grounds that he isn't Jewish... to which Hirsch responds with my favorite line of the movie: "Well, no one's perfect."

And then, with the hopes of humanity gathered around him, Judd Hirsch intones the words... of *Sh'ma Koleinu*.

"*Sh'ma Koleinu, Adonai Eloheinu, Chus V'racheim Aleinu*; Hear our voice, O Lord our God; have compassion upon us, and with that compassion accept our prayer." It is part of the *Amidah*, the daily service. And it is one of the most powerful prayers of the entire High Holy Days.

The implication is clear: God, hear our prayer, and respond. God, hear our prayer, and answer. God, hear our prayer and grant us our wish. Give us what we want!

But does God really do this? Can God do this? Every time I say these words, even more so during the Days of Awe, and more, now, in trying to make sense of what we have all been through, when I hear these words, I wonder how to take them.

Because I *do not believe* that God intervenes in the outcome of events. I do not think God causes good or bad things to happen to us.

So what are we doing here? Why pray? Or, bluntly, what good is God?

I believe that God responds... by helping us make sense out of events. I don't believe that things happen for a reason. I just don't. But I do believe... that they *happened* for a reason.

I believe that God does not cause bad or good things to happen to us, a child to contract a horrible disease, or an upstanding citizen to win the lottery, neither the smokestacks of Europe nor a new dawn on the distant shores of a Mediterranean Sea. And I don't believe that God caused COVID, chose who would catch it, designated some to recover and decided who would not.

Yes, I know, the liturgy and imagery of these Days of Awe invokes a God who controls our fate. The tradition certainly validates this view; it may be a source of comfort or pillar of faith still for many of you. I understand that.

But there *are* hints in our tradition of another voice, a faith-filled questioning of this puppet-pulling view of the Holy One. The same Bible in which Deuteronomy and Leviticus promise bumper crops for obedience and banishment for sin also gives us Job, a rebuttal, a refutation of the notion that only good things happen to good people, a denial of the idea that, as one writer puts it “poverty is the *consequence* of immorality rather than its cause.”

Sometimes, you know, bad things happen. Planes get seized. Debris from a shattered sky falls out of the air. A virus too small to see wreaks havoc with larger living things. Hoping and wishing and wanting won't change that. These things did not happen because you deserved them. And they won't go away with even the most heart-felt prayer.

And yet. Even so. I do believe that God hears our voice. God does answer prayers.

There is power in the *Mishebeirach*, the prayer for healing, in voicing hope and sending love, even if we know it may not cause a cure. Kol Nidrei stirs the soul, even if those are words we might not ever say in prose. Kaddish is a mantra, which takes us to another place.

What is the power of prayer? It is more than a magic wand. I believe our coming together is more than delusion, more than mere wish-fulfillment. Something happens to a community when we articulate our needs and give voice to our values. Something happens when we are aware of the pain in our midst.

Something happens to a patient when we prompt calls and cards and visits from the mentioning of a name. It's not a miracle. That's false advertising. But to turn the AA phrase on its head: healing happens.

I don't believe that things happen for a reason. But I do believe they happened for a reason. Karma. Kismet. B'shert. Every culture has a word, every folk a phrase for fate, a sense that things are part of a larger plan, that every little detail, every meeting and moment of our lives unfolds in accordance with some scheme we just can't grasp at the time, for some purpose which we will, if we are lucky, someday, glimpse in passing.

A friend dying of cancer, an infant's disability, the pandemic... I just can't accept that there was some pre-planned, *inherent* meaning in these things. **But.** That does not mean that these things have no meaning.

The core of *my* faith, my spirituality comes from the belief that God works *with* us to construct our story and construe our fate. We work *to make our moments mean* what they come to mean, and God our partner in process, the Ever-Present One who enables our efforts, who allows meaning to happen. We are, at our core... at our most creative and most human we are retroactive meaning-makers.

God is there as we pick up the pieces, Hand and Shoulder, a Push in the Back to make us make whatever sense of our lives we can and move on.

It is hard to believe it has been 21 years since that attack on our country. In the aftermath of 9/11, I heard a report on the radio, from an architect in New York. He kept standing on his balcony, staring at the skyline in disbelief. All he could see was what was not there. But his nine-year old daughter saw something else. She stood, and she held her father's hand. And then she said: "Dad. I think I can start to see the new view."

So what is the new view, on the third day which dawns around us now? What will we take, and what will we make of all of this?

Here is some of what I hope, I pray walks with us now. A new awareness that everything is connected: a sneeze in India can cause a cold in Indiana, a chip from China makes a difference in Chicago. And I appreciate the local and close at hand more than I had, not just the exotic and far away.

I hope we understand that we are all essential, all of us play a role not only for ourselves, but for each other. My behavior affects you; your actions impact me. And may we retain the sense that we are all valuable, and all vulnerable, and love and life are not a zero-sum game - one wins only when another loses -- but a mandate, a mission, a commandment to care, to create, to work towards a common good.

May there be renewed awe for the beauty and power of nature, and an abiding appreciation for the delicate line we need to walk to both produce and protect, to be healthy, to preserve our planet and secure our future.

I cherish family and friends and the people in my life, perhaps more intensely than before. And I am ever more aware of the need to reach out, to stay in touch, to share important parts of our lives.

These are ways I try to squeeze some sense, to make meaning out of the past few years. This is what I feel called by God to learn. As we get to know each other, I hope to hear what you have learned, how you have grown, what you take out of this time we have been through.

“*Sh'ma Koleinu*. Hear our prayer!” What do we ask for, really, on the High Holy Days? A sense of wholeness. That we perceive - or, indeed, impose - pattern and purpose around us. That we find holiness in the mundane *and* the momentous, in triumph and in tragedy. We pray that we may start to see, in the skyline of the soul, the new view of the next stage of our lives.

By choice and by action, together, let us *make this* a good year, and a better one.

L'shanah Tovah.