

The New View
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5779
September 9, 2018

We begin, on this night, our second High Holy Day season together. But it feels, to me, very much like an introduction, a first time. Last year was so extraordinary, so difficult, so challenging for all of us... it is a miracle that we came together at all. It is hard to remember, now, much more than that.

We open this season by turning inward, ancient words of humility and awe: *“Hin’ni He’ani Mimash, Nirash v’Nifchad;* Behold, me of little merit, trembling and alone, as I stand before You to plead for your people. O gracious God, Author of love and compassion, accept my petition, and that of my people.”

This year our plea, our petition, comes from some place deep inside, but hard to define. It is an almost wordless yearning, a kind of holding one’s breath in the turn of time, a mixture of memory and madness, of hardship and healing and hope.

I do remember one exchange during this season last year, around the time I was first able to use data and I managed, briefly, to log on to Facebook. I remember a question posted by my teacher Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. “What is it,” he asked his followers and online friends, “what is you are reading during services... at the High Holy Days this year?”

Now, some background. I don't know what any of *you* have snuck into services with you, to hide behind the pages and peek at when you are bored. Not that such a thing could ever happen here! But this is not as... bizarre a question as it might seem. Yehuda Kurtzer davens in a somewhat traditional setting -- which means, on the High Holy Days, that services are probably four hours long. To ask, then, what serious reading you bring with you, what work of philosophy or Jewish thought or inspiration you take in as a companion to the machzor, for private reading during slow moments in the service, what helps you dive more deeply into the themes of growth and change and repentance and reconciliation... that's actually... a very serious question.

So I didn't mean – I really didn't intend to throw off that deep discussion with my honest response. But I told the truth. I shared exactly what I was reading, in the middle of these services last year. It was my own search for light, my own quest for power. It was, in fact, the manual, for our generator.

What have we seen, and how have we grown, and what have we learned, over this past year?

A story. *Two Jews, Moishe and Itzik, are out for a walk in a Ukrainian forest near their homes. All of a sudden, up ahead on the path, they see two big 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."*

My friends, if I learned anything from being here during this moment in time is, indeed, that we are not all alone. Perhaps even, on this small island with ties all over the world, perhaps we never have been.

Mail was late, WiFi awry, data unreliable, so our records and our ability to tell this tale may not be accurate or complete. But the support shown to us, our island, our community, our congregation was absolutely incredible. In it came: contributions, from individuals and institutions: food, toiletries, water filters. Enough to organize five distributions in different locations, medicines and supplies for the hospital, a hundred generators given out to physicians and facilities and individuals alike; resources to help some in our community, support for My Brother's Workshop, the Reformed Church, the Community Foundation for the Virgin Islands, the Salvation Army. We helped schools, adopted teachers and families within some of those communities, propped up extra-curricular activities which otherwise would not have been possible.

Internally, we received targeted donations to replace the ruined white mantles on our scrolls, were given gifts of siddurim, Shabbat prayerbooks in equal measure to what we had lost. The new machzor you hold in your hands is actually much more than a replacement. Given by the Reform movement, facilitated by Federation, these are an upgrade, a gift of the new edition of the High Holy Day prayerbook, a change we had hoped to make at this point anyway. My former congregation in Maryland replaced 81 of our unusable Passover haggadot. We have a new keyboard, and a now functional version of

that aforementioned generator, both of which were broken beyond repair. Between claims and contributions, we heal and begin to deal with the damage to our museum, our library, our historic cemeteries, and pipes, pumps and infrastructure within this building.

As with many of our homes, there is still much to be done. The needs remain real. But we could never have come this far without that... flood of support. And when finally the time came to show our gratitude, to individuals, Chai members, friends and family who sent what they could, dozens of congregations, B'nai Mitzvah projects, Federation, the United Jewish Appeal and, when the time came to send our thanks... while I regret anyone we inadvertently missed, in fact, we had almost a thousand thanks. There were well over 900 cards and letters of acknowledgement to send out. What an amazing outpouring of love.

But what about us? And where are we now?

Think of the irony. Over the past year, and for the second time in my memory -- the first being in 2001 -- over this year we have been getting not just contributions, but calls and cards, email and outreach... from all over the world. It is as if this island was suddenly a pebble thrown into a pond, with ripples reaching out, as the Beatles might say, across the universe. Two months ago we even a high level visit -- a first of its kind -- along with aid and inquiries from Israel, asking a simple question. "Are you okay?"

Are we okay?

That... that's a good question. And it's... hard to say. All hail Sahara Dust, which makes us cough and wheeze and feel better, all at the same time. And I am, perhaps, not equipped to fully answer the question – we were here for such a short time before the storms that we really have no way of knowing what is normal, and what is not.

From what I can sense and see: it seems to me that we are on *a* road to recovery. But there is a long way to go. It is a more distant destination than I ever imagined in the immediate aftermath. And there are too many potholes on that path, bumps physical and psychic alike.

Phase One was survival and basic necessities. There was generosity and grit, creativity and character. People shared what little they had even with strangers; neighbors hung together. Improvisation and a spirit of solidarity was evident everywhere.

Phase Two is a struggle many are still in the middle of: wrangling with claims and companies, wrestling for resources, and finally, physically, at least starting the work of *tikkun*, of repair. There is persistence and flexibility, repackaging and rethinking.

But alongside this, Phase Three sets in. There is, I think, sadness under the surface, an ache of absence – awareness of people missing, places not reopening anytime soon, knowledge of not being where we were. To be jittery at the sound of strong wind, the hint of hard weather in the forecast.

This isn't true of everyone, it isn't obvious everywhere, but it does feel as if there is, as I said at the outset, a collective holding of the breath, not just for a season of storms but also a more general uncertainty about the future.

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק

“And on the third day,” we will read in the Torah tomorrow morning, “Abraham lifted up his eyes, and he beheld the place from afar.”

This may be a cycle, these days, these phases we pass through... as natural as the storms themselves. But I wonder if some of us still need to lift up our eyes... or open up our hearts. To unpack our feelings, and share where we are at.

And so, on Yom Kippur Afternoon, in one of the sessions in between services, we will make a space, for coming together and sharing our stories, our journeys of this past year, of where we may be headed. Maybe... no one will need this, or none will come. And there will be other options offered at the same time, for those who just want to move on or get beyond this topic already. But the space, the place, the time will be there, for anyone who wants it.

For now, however, I have other words which I hope will be helpful. We are a tradition that has had to take a long view of history, a people who have had to find new places and new perspectives in order to survive. There are three values I see in Jewish life, three Hebrew words which may speak to our needs in this time, and this place.

And so as we gather here on the eve of the new year, this night I would like to speak with you about *savlanut*, *ahavah*, and *tikvah*. About “patience,” “love,” and “hope.”

***Savlanut*. Patience.**

Even before our arrival we were told about “island time.” But to mix a meteorological metaphor, who knew the tropics could be so glacial? I actually think “island time” does *not* merely mean that things run late. Sometimes things happen early! What I think it means is... um... unpredictable. There are those for whom this pace, things happening in their own time and not yours is charming. And there are those who it drives... bananas. Most of us, I assume, are each of those people, at one time or another.

Maybe it is one with the custom of greeting and acknowledgement. “Good morning, good afternoon, good evening.” (Although I still haven’t gotten used to the non-bedtime usage of “Good night.”) Maybe it is about being there with others, rather than always in a rush to get “things” done.

In this way “island time” would flow together with the teachings of Martin Buber. He taught the holiness of “I-Thou:” encounter, meeting, relationships, putting people first. He contrasted this with “I-It,” the instrumental, utilitarian, transactional... in which we focus only on what we want and need.

Or this, a teaching from the Talmud, from *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Ancestors:

לא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּנָה.

“It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. But neither are you free to desist from it.”

In the middle of repairs, or even a *shiputz*, a renovation... I am not sure how helpful this is. Except as a reminder. It is a powerful, humbling, and deeply spiritual lesson: no matter *how much we may want to...* we cannot “force the ending,” make things work exactly when we want them to. A lesson on the limits of power, constraint of the ego: precisely because we are not alone, flowing from the fact of being interconnected with others, *our will, our wants, even our needs... is not the only force at work in the world.*

A lesson in the importance of **Savlanut. Patience.**

Ahavah. Love.

And then there is Facebook. And Twitter. And Social Media in general.

I get a great deal of information from What’s Going on St. Thomas. Do you know that it has more followers – 72,000 – than there are people on the island. I advertise on it, I ask questions on it, I learn a lot from it. And yet...

In person, and online, after the storms, the ways in which we judge each other... Especially on the issue of who left, and who stayed.

It is understandable. It comes from frustration. It is a kind of venting. And also: we feel validated when people make the same choices we do; threatened or angry when they do not. But it is hurtful, it is harmful, it tears at the fabric of community. And it does not have to be this way.

I know this because, actually, I have seen this movie before. It was in Israel, it was in the early 2000s, and the issue then was not rain but rocks. And rockets. And bombs.

Since the 1970's, Reform clergy spend the first year of Seminary in Israel, at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. But one summer, at the peak of the Second Intifada, with buses blowing up, mayhem in malls, shopping centers shuttered, restaurants under threat, and Israelis hunkering down in their homes, our movement faced a dilemma regarding these students. It decided that remaining in Israel that year was... optional. It created an alternative track in Cincinnati. Half the class stayed. The other half left.

That class, I am told, simply never recovered. All of what they knew in their heads... never really reached the heart, at least collectively. Everyone knew what was involved: family pressure, fear, individual considerations and circumstances one person faced which others could not fully understand. Always there was the rift; always they remember: who stayed, and who fled.

This finger pointing doesn't help anyone. Everyone is different: there are medical considerations, opportunity costs, educational experiences, or just

plain needing a break. Every person weighs these things in different ways. And yes, it is true: some have the ability to act on those considerations.

Best if we remember: if you care about this place in *any way*, if you faced the weather or raised funds from afar, if you drew water out of cisterns or vainly looked for news reports from the mainland, let us look at this island, this boat on the ocean and see all of us in it, all of us on it. Let us care for and about and act with love towards... all who feel connected to this place.

In grief, in the face of loss, often there are... no right words, and many wrong things to say. But if there is one piece of wisdom I have learned, one thing I try to share with families in mourning it is this: remember that there are stages of grief. And remember, that everyone goes through them... in their own way. We react differently, process things at our own pace, experience the same loss in very different ways.

In our families, in our community, on our islands... let us show grace and compassion and kindness towards each other, even those whose choices and circumstances were and are different from our own. ***Ahavah. Love.***

Tikvah. Hope.

The dust around us is not just from the Sahara. It is on the waterfront, it is on Main Street. There are plans and promises, tearing down and building back. I don't know enough yet to have an opinion about costs and priorities,

what will make the most difference, what should come first, what has been tried before, what will work and what will be wasted, what might be a blessing and what puts the businesses at risk.

But I am also new enough to think that the potential here is...enormous. And to know that what this place, these islands, will be like in just a few years may be... maybe... very different, in ways which are better, than they are now.

Mostly, though, I carry one story with me. It is from just after 9/11.

A few days after the attacks, 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."

וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרֶחֶק We lift up our eyes. And we behold the place from afar."

A distant shore. But we are not alone. And we can get closer. If we care enough about each other... to move forward together.

Savlanut. Patience.

Ahavah. Love.

And Tikvah. Hope.

L'shanah Tovah.