

Shoftim 5779  
From Despair to Hope  
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I have a confession. For most of my life I have felt disconcerted, irritated, manipulated, even, by the sudden shift from utter despair to solace and salvation in the 10 special prophetic readings surrounding the date a month ago, the 9th of Av, on which annually we remembered the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. For the 3 weeks prior to that saddest day in the Jewish year, we read the "*Tlata D'Poranuta*," prophetic admonishments from Jeremiah and Isaiah, warning of the destruction to come if we do not change our ways. Then, for 7 weeks following that saddest of days, we read the "*Shiva d'Nechemata*," 7 prophesies of consolation and hope from the Book of Isaiah. Those 7 lead us directly to Rosh HaShanah.

Okay, so I can be a bit particular--shall we say, nerdy--about things involving words, especially in sacred texts. But seriously, can our emotions change that fast? If we really felt the Destruction, if we really internalized the meanings of radical shattering of the veneer that says all is well when it is not, if we used that day only 4 weeks ago to lay bare our own brokenness, so that we could then begin a process of renewing our lives with the coming of Rosh HaShanah, then does it not ask too much of us to make such an abrupt shift from brokenness to redemption? Is God really that fickle? Are we?

I bring you this question because I actually think it's not just about *my* being quirkily sensitive to words. I think that many of us come here to pray and hear Scripture and sometimes we feel like the words we are praying and hearing must be meant for someone else. Sometimes we feel that the words don't land where we are and we wonder if we are the only ones who are not being moved. I know it happens, *and* I don't think it has to be that way. Today, I want to see what we might be able to take from today's prophetic readings and from our *parashah*--our Torah reading--that can help us open up a bit to the present moment.

Let me clarify what I mean by "the present moment." Right now we are one week into the month of Elul. This is the month when we are supposed to be doing what's called *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, which means taking account of spiritual lives and examining how our deeds match our highest values and sincerest hopes regarding the kind of impact we want our lives to make on the world and those who inhabit it. This month is supposed to feel challenging. We are not supposed to feel "all better" yet. In Elul, our brokenness lies before us like so many shards of glass flashing under the sun's glare.

By the way, even if you didn't lean into Tisha B'Av, that aforementioned Very Sad Day, I'm still gonna serve up Elul to you on a silver platter. This is the time when we work harder than usual to contemplate what is not working, how we are getting in the way of living our most flourishing lives, how we stop short of offering up our best selves to the effort of building a better world.

We sit in the rubble we have made, and we hope for redemption. We contemplate the habits that impede our thriving and we place our trust in the possibility of reclaiming the love our fearful hearts have exiled.

Yet the month of Elul, with all of its soul searching, is not supposed to be a time when we are harsh with ourselves. We are supposed to do this work in a spirit of love and compassion for ourselves. The letters that spell the name of the month, Aleph-Lamed-Vav-Lamed also stand for the verse from Shir HaShirim, "*Ani L'dodi v'Dodi Li,*" I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. This month calls us to turn toward our deepest selves with all of God's love and face what we need to face, so that we can make ourselves better people and serve more fully and wholly. So we can be wholly holey holy.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshisah, an early Hasidic teacher who began his career in late 18th century Poland, teaches on today's *parasha* that the command "*Tzedek, Tzekek Tirdof*"--Justice, Justice, you shall pursue, which can also be translated as "righteousness, righteousness, you shall pursue--because in biblical Hebrew justice and righteousness share one, nuanced word--Reb Simcha says that the word "tzedek" is *not* stated twice in order to emphasize the importance of justice or righteousness, as one might assume, but rather to inform the quality of justice we must practice. One "tzedek" modifies the other. The verse then means: "Pursue a righteous righteousness," or a "righteous justice." The ends do not justify the means. If we believe that God's intention is to be a force of love and compassion, then we must judge and sentence ourselves with love and compassion. On a personal and intrapersonal level must give ourselves the mercy we hope that God wants to give us. In doing so we bring God properly into the process of our own becoming and the flourishing of our relationships.

And love always needs hope if it is to thrive. Many of us need a lot of assurance that we can heal our brokenness. For 7 weeks, the 7 haftarot of hope and consolation serve up God's faith in us and desire for relationship with us at the time of our greatest shattering so that we have hope of salvation. The change does *not* happen all at once. Instead, what I believe is supposed to happen is that we let the words wash over our wounded

souls week after week until something new is reborn--as the archetypal number 7 signifies. And that something that gets reborn is our selves.

Jewish narratives always work on two levels. As we cycle throughour calendar year, on the communal level we look for meaning in our history and our narratives. On the personal level we try to get inside the stories, to find the places where they resonate for us and help us move forward with renewed purpose and commitment to our truest and best selves.

So at this time, as each of us contemplates their place in the Universe, we sit in the smatterings of what has gone wrong, of where we have failed, and we find the hope and courage to commit to changing the habits and patterns that take us down the paths where we fall into the same pits over and over again. It takes time to believe we can change. It takes time for us to trust ourselves enough to make the effort to love more deeply, to show compassion more often, to give more willingly, to speak more authentically, than we did before. It cannot happen only in the days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. The weeks we are in right now are the time to intensify our inner work.

Going back to my earlier struggle with the shift in prophecies, from admonition to hope: I think my problem boils down to a profound question of trust. If I'm being honest I must say that sometimes, I am afraid of the free fall, afraid that if I open myself to change both within myself and in how I relate to the people in my life, I will not be able to manage the disappointment that will come if the improvements do not last. I fear that bumps in the road will derail my sense of progress or that I might step on a mine. And if I'm being honest, that approach is *not* the way to practice righteous righteousness, or compassionate self-improvement. Maybe, like me, some of you struggle to trust in the possibility that something new is emerging. And maybe, like me, you don't want to be the kind of person who nips new growth in the bud, who clings to a withered vine than to graft a new possibility. It takes a lot of courage to create a safety net woven of love.

Can we trust ourselves this Elul, right now, to incline our hearts toward a vision of our own refinement and the betterment of our relationships, knowing that there will be bumps in the road, knowing that our progress likely will advance at a pace two steps forward, one step back? Can we take note of our fears and plunge ahead anyway, finding strength in compassion and love? I hope so. Our readings from Isaiah can inspire us to cling to that hope, as it comes from one who testifies to God's unbounded love and God's wish that we live into that love, through our choices and our actions.

Today's Torah reading offers its own earnest hope that I, that we, can trust ourselves to move forward with hope, despite our fear. Our *parasha* says something fascinating about how we are to apply out the laws of our Torah in cases that require interpretation, especially as circumstances change and new understandings must be generated. "If a case is too baffling for you to decide...you shall go straightaway to the place that God will have chosen, and appear before the Levite priests, or the magistrate in charge at that time, and present your problem. They will render a verdict, and you must carry it out scrupulously and not deviate from it" (Deut. 17: 8-11). Clearly, the Torah is concerned that we continue to adhere to the laws that make Torah life giving, that offer us a compelling and beautiful way to walk in the world. What fascinates me is that God has no idea how, exactly, it will work. God trusts us to discern the places where decisions can be made and, even more importantly, to discern who may be empowered to interpret and drive Torah forward so that we can continue to base our lives on its principles and practice the way of life Torah offers. In every generation, we are all expected to figure out how to judge righteously. And not only every generation. Every moment is an opportunity for renewal.

God is present in our lives, intimately connected and moving through us, calling us in a flow of unending love and helping us to discern our next steps. We do not need to feel alone. This moment calls us to righteous justice, that compassionate striving toward the enduring truth of our lives and our service in this world. As our hands pick up those shiny bits of what is shattered, I pray that we can hold them gently as we seek to understand what they come to teach us about our lives. And as we do that work, may our hopes lift us and lead us toward renewal and rebirth.

Amen.