

Yom Kippur 5782
Perceiving in Rubble
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Rabbi Yose was ambling among the ruins of Jerusalem about a century after the Destruction of the Second Temple. He entered a crumbled building to pray. The prophet Elijah noticed the sage's arrival. He posted guard at the entrance of the crumbled edifice, and when Rabbi Yose had completed his prayers, the two greeted each other. Elijah admonished Rabbi Yose for praying in a ruin, where demons or bad characters might be lurking about. After thus chiding him, Elijah asked the Rabbi an odd question: "While you prayed in that ruin, what voice did you hear?" Rabbi Yose answered, "I heard a Heavenly voice, cooing like a dove and bemoaning the fate of the exiled children of Israel."

Unsurprised, Elijah then said, "That voice of God that you heard in the ruin--that very same voice cries out every day, all over the world, every time the Children of Israel pray in synagogues and study halls, especially when they praise God in the *Kaddish* prayer. When Jews say *Kaddish*, God's heart opens a well of mixed emotions: "Happy is the King who is thus praised in His house," and "Oy, how the Father's heart breaks for his children who yet cling to him, even after He has exiled them" (Bavli Brachot 3a).

During the past year, I often felt as if we were praying together in ruins, yet seeing your faces on Zoom affirmed for me that God's presence continued to seek unity with ours. Exiled from our sanctuary, I could understand how, when our People have endured prolonged periods of anxiety and suffering over the generations, we have taken solace in our faith that God is with us and still yearns for closeness despite our dispersion.

I have heard many people say that they have felt God in moments of profound shift, like when attending a birth or a death. People who have doubted God's existence sometimes experience the Divine Presence profoundly at such intense moments. Indeed, when it comes to times of great dislocation, anxiety, and trauma, our sources teach that a particular intimacy with God becomes possible.

That Talmudic story about Rabbi Yose praying in the ruin feels apt as I speak to you from our parking lot today, dislocated for a second year in a row. And there *is* a destruction happening here. Before the pandemic, many of those davening their hearts out here never would have imagined that there would be four cameras projecting our faces to hundreds of screens on the holiest day of the year, and those at home wouldn't have fathomed participating from their living rooms via screen technology. We took for

granted that our communal family would stand together on this day, in our beloved sanctuary, year after year, hearing one another's hearts beat.

Time will tell what the current dislocation and disconnection from each other's physical presence will do to faith communities everywhere. But on this day my concern is for our spiritual well being. I have heard people say that the pandemic has dehumanized us. That has not been *my* observation, but I do believe that the past year proved especially difficult for us spiritually due to a phenomenon known as "moral injury," a concept first named by psychologist Jonathan Shay. Moral injury, also known as moral trauma, results from a disconnect between the moral actions we want to take and our inability to take those actions due to constraints beyond our control. Moral injury pulled us down during the past year.

Moral injury is reciting a deathbed Vidui for a member of this congregation via Facetime without holding the dying person's hand. It is attending a wedding of a close friend or relative like a voyeur, not walking down the aisle or calling out "Mazal tov" when the glass is smashed, or not even being able to see because another Zoom guest has inadvertently shared their screen, and now all you can see is someone's Amazon cart. Moral trauma is telling elderly parents they cannot fly out to visit even though it's been a year, or not being allowed to visit your dying mother in her care facility on Mother's Day. It's not setting up the meal after your grandchild's bris or holding the new baby or serving the bereaved at a shiva because it's not safe to attend. Moral injury is burying your loved one via Zoom because it's not safe to travel. It's depositing your loved one at the front door of the hospital and not being there when they wake up from surgery. It's visiting the sick from outdoors, through an open window, in the snow. Moral trauma is not holding graduation celebrations for the kid who struggled through school and completed their degree against the odds. Moral injury is not hugging a friend in need, not smiling at the tired cashier because they can't see your mouth anyway. It's not shaking hands with the kid having their first job interview. It's parking your own kids in front of a screen for math class knowing they are unlearning how to live in society. It's when your kids need Zoom school help and you just don't have it in you because you're teaching your own class in five minutes, the dog is barking, your partner is making too much noise in *their* Zoom work meeting, and you're too angry and exhausted to be nice. Moral injury is forgetting names and then faces of members of your community because the time apart is now longer than the time you have spent together. It's not taking a role in services because you can't stand any more Zoom. It's knowing you might have saved a life if you knew then what you learned only a few weeks later. Moral trauma is telling people we love that we cannot be with them because we, or they, are not vaccinated.

When I told Beth, our Education Director, about the pile of rubble that poured out when I wrote about moral trauma, Beth asked if it made me feel better. The painful truth is that my heart still hurts from a year of incredible loss and the knowledge that it's not over. There is a difference between the loneliness and inconvenience of disrupted communal life and the mess of not being able to be the people we want to be.

Our member David Balkansky likes to remind me that "things do get better." He's right. All of that moral injury? We are starting to work it out. I believe that we are living through a moment of profound learning and that we are, spiritually, exactly where we need to be right now. Moral injury can make us jaded and cynical. It can also motivate us to make good on the opportunities we missed and make habitual the opportunities we took to do good in ways we had not done as much before.

Look at what we have been able to figure out. We discovered and nurtured qualities in ourselves that helped us get through: Resilience. Patience. The ability to sit quietly with people who are suffering. Self control when we resisted distractions in order to be fully present to people on screens. Making the outdoors more of an extension of our homes. Flexibility. The ability to be okay when not satisfied. Gaining self-awareness about the ways in which, despite our suffering, our privilege still sets us apart from so many who bore more of the burden. Taking initiative in reaching out to people with help or just a call to catch up. Giving more tzedakah, if we could. Showing more gratitude to people we might not have noticed before. Scientific ingenuity and medical creativity. Letting things that were less important slide off the edges if we couldn't get to them, and accepting that we could not do everything. Less hubris. More humility. I would like to think that we redeemed at least some of the moral injury we experienced.

Jewish tradition sees none other than God as a role model for how to turn devastation into new learning. In the midrash, our sages posit that God created many worlds before ours and then destroyed them because they were not good enough (B'reishit Rabba 3:7). Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel expands on the midrash thus: We find that this world--*ours*--was created out of ruins, and we are forced to understand that we find great *wisdom* in destruction. Our world was born out of the wisdom God gained from prior destructions, and, in fact, it is in metabolizing what is learned in devastation that Divine wisdom creates the world we experience. And so it is for us, created in God's image. We, too, destroy and we, too, suffer from the brokenness in our world. **But we are not powerless. To the contrary, we are agents of creation. Our task is to extract the wisdom we can find so that we can build lives on the ruins of our failed efforts.**

Going back to the legend of Rabbi Yose who heard God cooing and calling in the ruin, do you know what I find shocking? I find it shocking that he has no idea that God coos and calls out in every sanctuary where Jews daven. If God was cooing and calling out in every synagogue and study hall where he prayed, how could it be that Rabbi Yose, who played a major role in shaping Judaism as we know it, had never heard it? And, if we're being honest, how do we not hear it, either? I think it is because he, and we, are more attuned to the Divine voice at times when our yearning to know that we matter feels most urgent. A year like the one we just experienced engenders a unique attunement.

Recently I learned from local psychologist Judith Heilitzer a theory in psychology: adversity actually *helps* us build moral lives. Judith quotes Sarah Todd, who writes: "An experience does not have to be fun in order to qualify to be psychologically enriching. It might even be a hardship. Living through a war or a natural disaster might make it hard to feel as though you are living a particularly happy or purposeful life, but you can still come out of the experience with psychological richness. You may experience suffering but still find value in how your experience shapes your understanding of yourself and the world around you. It is openness to experience which encourages psychologically rich lives" (in "Psychologists say A Good Life does not have to be happy, or even meaningful").

"It is openness to experience which encourages psychologically rich lives." It is standing in a ruin, and listening to the voice that we can hear best--right here.

Today, we bring into our midst the memories of those who taught us good values and invested their hopes in our living them out because they believed we could. Feeling their love and their faith in us helps us find moral clarity and the resolve to emerge wiser and more compassionate than we were before.

There is plenty we wish we could have done differently in the past year, whether related to the pandemic or not. Rabbi Finkel concludes his teaching by reminding us that our world in all of its realms, and all of its creatures, are created in an act of Divine love. God does not give up in destruction. No, God coos to us there and reminds us that we are not alone, and our lives have meaning. For every regret, we can find an opportunity to bring loving kindness into our world with more resolve than we had before. Our resolve only increases when we recall the investment of hope and faith in us, made by those people who loved us whom we remember on this day.

Together as a community, today, let us pray for strength borne of insight to become better people because of what we have experienced. Each of us holds within ourselves

the hopes of generations. **We are not our experiences. They are our teachers. We are their students, and we are learning.**

The ruins of ancient Jerusalem have long been built over, but we have our own rubble to deal with. Commitment to ongoing self-reflection and repair is baked into our Jewish DNA. So--how *do* we hear the voice that calls us and gives us the strength to keep going and the hope that we can better ourselves? Maybe it's by davening with your community on a day like this, or through contemplative practice, or music, art, outdoor adventure, or what have you. I asked our members at daily minyan how they find it the strength to keep trying to do their best and keep going, and the answer they repeated many times was that we find it in our connection to one another. Knowing that we are not alone, that others understand and believe that we are doing the best we can, and that our extended community of friends and relatives will still be there on the other side of the trauma gives us strength. Showing up for each other and reflecting together help us hold what we're learning.

All of that gives me faith that the Divine voice still coos and calls out to us--and I do believe that's how we hear it--as surely as we see the Divine image in one another's faces.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav would pray: Dear God, Teach me to begin anew, to renew myself along with all of Creation, just as You renew the entire world each day. Show me how I can break free of the constraints of my habits, the restraints of my insecurities, the shackles of my unwarranted fears. Teach me, dear God, to make a fresh start, to break yesterday's patterns, to stop telling myself I can't, when I can, I'm not, when I am, I'm stuck, when I am eminently free."

May that be our prayer and our blessing. *G'mar chatimah tovah.*

