

Tikkun Olam Chavurah, Rosh Hashanah 5787

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Instructions on Not Giving Up, Ada Limón

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out
of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's
almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving
their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate
sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees
that really gets to me. When all the shock of white
and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave
the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath,
the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin
growing over whatever winter did to us, a return
to the strange idea of continuous living despite
the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then,
I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf
unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.

This has been quite a year: absurdity after absurdity, cruelty after cruelty, so much that is
impossible to believe is really happening. And here we are, at the start of a new year. In hope? In
despair? In openness to whatever may come? In exhaustion and with broken hearts? All of this.
By being here together on Rosh Hashanah, we are committing to taking it all. But how?

In the Torah reading this morning, we heard one of the most painful lines in the Torah: Vayomer
Elohim el Avraham, al yairah b'aynecha al hana'ar v'al amatecha. Kol asher tomar eylecha sara
sh'ma b'kolah ki v'yitzchak yikarea lecha zarah. Abraham is worried about listening to Sarah
and throwing Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert and God says "Don't worry about the boy
and your maidservant. Do everything that Sarah tells you to do because Isaac will be your seed.

Just when Abraham is feeling a touch of humanity, of unwillingness to perform the horrific act
that Sarah is asking him to do, it is God who tells him to do it without any fear. Not just another
person, but the voice of God.

We are living in an upside-down topsy-turvy world where lies masquerade as truth and where we don't often know where we stand. So many of us stand up and speak out against the injustice we see, but we often feel as if our words and our actions blow away with little to show for them. A world where God himself is used to bolster nationalism, to justify cruelty, to cover up acts of horror.

And we are told that today, the start of a new year, we really can begin again, start anew, let go of the past and move ahead freely. But how do we know how? What is the God we can count on? Where is our base?

Every week I stand with others at the ICE office and we pray and protest and sing and call out to the people in the office, hoping they will change their actions, stop killing people and detaining people and separating families. We tell stories of people being denied medical treatment at Moshannon or of people who have been living here for twenty-five years and who have legal status suddenly being pulled out of work and deported, often to countries they have never been to or to places they escaped from out of fear for their lives leaving whole families behind, or of people being shot and killed just because.. They are somehow treated as less than human and not deserving of basic decency. But I know that many of the ICE officers believe in God, and that some believe in a God that justifies, even supports their actions. When they look at the priests and pastors and rabbis in front of their building, they think we've lost God. Upside down world indeed.

At the heart of today's service is Unetaneh Tokef, our realization of the power that is greater than any of us, greater than we can ever imagine, the power that brings us life and death, that holds us and remembers all our deeds, that determines who shall live and who shall die, by what horrific means shall they die. At the heart of the prayer is a statement declaring the justice of that God, the goodness of godliness. And our response, the only way to ease the pain of the decree of our death, is to live with repentance, prayer, generosity. But is that enough? Can that carry us throughout the year in these times? When I'm standing at ICE and hearing of the numbers of people killed or detained, lives ruined or turned upside down for no good reason, I'm not sure. When I'm part of a vigil remembering 20,000 children killed in Gaza in the past few years, I'm not sure. Because none of them should be dead. Their deaths cannot be attributed to a power in

the world beyond humanity. Their deaths are humanity's fault. But we still say the words – this year as every year. And will we find meaning in them?

None of this- teshuva, tefilah tzedakah- is simple. We can glibly say the words, but the reality? Not straightforward or clear. And even then, if we struggle with teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah, can that change us enough to face the world as it truly is? So that we never give up trying to change it? So that we interact with the power in the universe to make our voices clear: we see what is happening and we will not just accept it. We too have power, right here on earth, and we will use it to say that nothing is written that we cannot try to edit.

This year, I am tempted to borrow from another holiday to give me a greater clue as to how to truly move ahead – from Pesach. We are told that when the Israelites are at the edge of the Red Sea, Moses lifts his staff as he is supposed to do. The sea should have parted, but nothing happens. He tries again and again but nothing happens. And then one person, Nachshon ben Aminadab, takes a risk and walks bravely into the sea – not waiting for God, not waiting for Moses, just a community member stepping up and showing his power. The sea parts.

The message is clear: an outside power will not create the change that we want in the world, will not do anything for us – not on Rosh Hashanah or on any day – unless we stand up and stand together in every possible way. And how do we reach the place to be able to do that? How did Nachshon? We find hints to how from this one prayer, Unetaneh Tokef, and from these three words, teshuva, tefilla, tzedakah. The point of our being here today is to face ourselves together in community, to remember where we have been, to truly notice where we are, and to imagine where we can go.

Teshuva is not something that is done to us. It is something that we do. Repentance means facing the most frightening thing we possible can – the deepest parts of ourselves and then taking the risk to reach out to others whom we need to connect with. We need to be honest with ourselves, not make any excuses, just be honest. Who have we been? How have we treated those we love? And for the teshuvah to be complete, we need to commit to changing the way we've been. It takes having the most frightening conversations: It may be with our own family members; it may be our friends; it may be our communities. We need to take the risk to share our truths with those we care about. We cannot stand in front of an ICE office and honestly share our truth if we are not ready to share it personally, deeply, fully. For some of us, those truths are about Palestine.

Can we be open and honest about how we feel, about what we see? When we are aware that 20,000 Gazan children have been killed, can we take the often-frightening risk in this challenging Jewish world, to say what we truly believe? It takes facing the fear that has held us back and pushing ourselves to move ahead, to be Nachshon. Everyone of us can make a difference.

But the key to these Days of Awe is that we don't do any of this alone. These are both deeply personal and profoundly communal holidays. Next week when we ask forgiveness on Yom Kippur, all our prayers will be in the plural: Ashamnu, bagadnu – we have sinned; we have transgressed. The work starts with an “I” but the strength comes from knowing there's a “we” behind us, supporting us, holding us. These days are days of awe because doing real repentance, honestly and completely is an awesome power. If we can begin that process, our whole community will be changed.

And tefillah? Prayer, reflection? Again, if we think that only praying to a God outside us will provide us with what we need to move ahead, to keep challenging this broken world, we are wrong. The God of the Hebrew Bible commands Abraham to do horrific things; the God within and around us is a very different force.

Of all the people I debate with throughout the year, disagree with in interesting and fun conversations, among my favorite is Rebecca Alpert, my close friend and chosen sister. This year, as I was planning for the holidays, Rebecca called me to say that she realized that she disagreed with the fact that we removed the words Hamelech Hayoshev al Kiseh Ram V'nisah, the king who sits on a high and exalted throne from the start of our morning service – sorry that we replaced the words with Hashechina hamarvah et kol hay'kum the presence of God that permeates all creation.

Rosh Hashanah, she said, is about facing that power that is over and above any human power, the one that we face in Unetaneh Tokef, that means that death comes to us whether or not we humans want it to, and figuring out how to deal with it, to move toward acceptance of it, but not to deny it– Hashechina felt too much like a denial of that power. I've thought a lot about this. And I still can't bring myself to say those words, words that express power as a male hierarchical figure as the exemplar of power in our world and I like to think that I'm accepting that power but claiming that it can be attributed to the Shechinah, the divine presence of God as it dwells with humanity,

as it is closer to us, within and around us. That is a power I can respect and struggle with as I start a new year.

But in the days since our argument, I've come to understand Rebecca's point more fully. And I've found that God, that power, is more and more challenging. Am I denying that ultimate power when I refuse to use the image of a king on a high and exalted throne? Is it death I'm resisting facing and not royal hierarchy? While we can step in to try to prevent the unjust deaths we see humans bring about, death itself? It is inevitable. Am I denying that? These are the questions of tefillah, of reflection, of prayer. And only if we are ready to confront the fullness of life and death can we find, as the prayer states, "the decree, while still real, is easier to face".

I prepare so many bodies for burial in my role with the local Chevrah Kadisha, the group that prepares bodies according to Jewish traditional practice: honoring the body with the pouring of water and the dressing in a white linen shroud, that I often think I must be more comfortable with the reality of death. I face it so often. But this Rosh Hashanah, I'm more aware of the tefillah that I still need to do, the work that I need to do, to feel truly open to the inevitable.

And third, tzedakah. At face value, it seems clear. If we are generous in our giving, we will feel better about our lives and therefore our deaths. That's true at one level. But tzedakah is not so straightforward. At the root of the word tzedakah is the word tzedek, justice. Giving to make a difference, to bring greater justice to the world matters. Giving to feed the people of Gaza; giving to organizations working to end the killing; giving to support immigrant families being separated and deeply hurt; giving over and over again to the causes that make the world more just: that matters.

And then, giving of ourselves: whether it's standing in front of the ICE building or the Israeli embassy or our senators' and representatives offices to demand that they vote to Block the Bombs or renew TPS to the Haitian community: to make it clear that we will never support an administration that tramples on justice and that massacres the truth.

Tzedakah is not so simple; it's being strategic and thinking carefully about the most effective ways to change the world with our gifts. We all have so many gifts and the world needs each one of us even if we often think it doesn't. Look at Nachshon – one small member of the community could part the Red Sea. Just imagine what we can do.

At the end of her poem V'ahavta, Aurora Levins Morales writes:

Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth
Into the throat with which you sing. Escalate your dreams.
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd
Over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.

Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.
So that we, and the children of our children's children
may live.

That is our goal for this new year: May we keep dreaming, keep imagining, keep facing the
world and our lives with honesty, teshuvah, openness, tefillah, and generosity of spirit, tzedakah.
And in this way, may we and the children of our children's children live in a happier, healthier
world.