

Erev Rosh Hashanah
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“Silver Linings in Troubled Times”

Earlier this evening, I went to the parking lot to see if you were there. You weren't. I went to Wolff-Toomim Hall to see if you took seats in the back. You weren't there. Actually, there are no seats in back this year, either. The truth is that I know where you are. It's the same place you've been since last March. It's just that we never thought we'd still be apart for the High Holy Days. Thank goodness for technology and the privilege to be together this way. Since last spring, as weeks became months of isolation and physical distancing, it occurred to me that there were silver linings that I couldn't deny; there were actually some good things that came out of all this. You see, Talmud teaches, “Gam zu l'tovah,” this too is for good; I just didn't know that it was true, even now.

Last March, when we began to lead Shabbat services from home on Zoom, the commute from my living room to the kitchen for Shabbat dinner was much shorter than my drive home from Temple. As a result, Lisa and I invited our four grown children, our daughter-in-law, our future son-in-law, and our parents to join us for “Lyon Shabbat” by Zoom. Every week for six months, we've made Shabbat together, with blessings, kibitzing, and fun. It's a silver lining.

Many of you wrote me about your silver linings, too. Today, your silver linings are part of our shared hope for the Jewish New Year. With his permission, an 85-year-old widower wrote me. He explained, “Death and aging have diminished my social circle. Thus, I awaited the arrival of the coronavirus with trepidation.” You see, he lives alone in Houston. His family is spread across the country, though he does connect with them by Zoom, as he does with his Beth Israel clergy. During the initial crisis last spring, his son called to tell him that he and his family were driving to Houston. They were coming to pick him up and bring him home with them. It was at least a two-day drive each way. When he safely arrived there, he and I met on Zoom, again. It was a great comfort for both of us to feel close, again, even if we couldn't be in the same room. Later, in his accounting of silver linings, he wrote, “I have spent the past seven weeks in [my family's] home as a welcomed father and grandfather. I have come to know them as complicated, complex, accomplished loving adults. They have come to know me as a loving, declining elder who, in a long life, has found blessing.” He concluded, “They are my descendants; they are my reward.”

His extraordinary gratitude moved me. We're taught in Proverbs (17:6), “Grandchildren are the crown of their elders, and the glory of children is their parents.” To exchange gifts of wisdom between generations by Zoom, or through extraordinary loving acts enabled him to know that his progeny is his joy, and that he isn't lonely even when he's alone.

One woman wrote me about the silver linings that she and her husband found, together. She described the silver lining as a “PAUSE”. She wrote “pause” in all capital letters. They've spent more time communicating, spending quality time around the house and in the yard, watching shows, playing games, even mahjonnig, which she taught her husband, and really “chilled,” as she put it. Less stress for them created room for play, discovery, and peace between them. As the daughter of a survivor of the Holocaust, she holds onto her faith as one

of the silver linings that makes all things possible. A pandemic is nothing compared to what her mother endured; but, faith, she believes, will sustain her, too.

On matters of faith, Elie Wiesel said in an interview, “I cannot not believe. Not because of myself, but because of those who were before me. It is my love for and fidelity to my parents, my grandparents, and theirs, and simply to stop, to be last in the chain, is wrong. Faith, he said, is a choice, and he chose faith.

Another gentleman told me that before COVID-19, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, threatened his life and took many others who were his friends. The question, “Why am I still here?” he wrote, remains a lingering question. But, in years since then, he learned that Judaism asks lots of questions, so it’s okay with him if the question goes unanswered for now. He has found meaning in every day, even during our current pandemic. Since mid-March, he made a Zoom Seder at Passover with his husband and their families. They’ve worshiped at Beth Israel with us by Zoom and livestream. And, though underlying health conditions cause him concern, he made a point to write that “solitude is different than loneliness.” He reaches out to family to fill quiet hours and to remain close. He’s grateful for what he calls “the small things,” namely, his parents, and life, itself. Perhaps he might accept my recommendation to call them “big things.” Parents validate love and belonging. Life validates our place and gives us purpose.

A friend in the congregation wrote me that she found her silver lining in charitable deeds, in mitzvahs. At the time of her note to me, she and her friends made 650 crocheted masks for essential workers, scarves for cancer patients, and baby blankets for newborns in the hospital. She called it therapeutic and a mitzvah, too. She ended her letter with gratitude for life, health and love of family and real friends. To her, “real friends” emerged from her circle to be especially available and accessible.

Torah teaches, (Lev. 19:18), “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The best friendships are with people who have full hearts and are ready to share. They know when to call because they know it matters. Her silver lining, while it shined a light on what matters most, also drew a boundary around what didn’t --- at least, not anymore.

These contributors shared their soulful experiences of gratitude, faith, validation and mitzvah. And, because each of you has a silver lining of your own, we know that our silver linings are not cliché. Actually, silver linings are very Jewish. Silver linings are the product of hopefulness; and, we are a hopeful people.

In history, Jews built their future on hope. To understand, let’s go back to the 1st century, in the year 70CE, when Roman legions destroyed the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem. It was one of the least hopeful times. Emerging rabbis struggled to create a new way forward for Jewish life. In their hands, rabbinic Judaism defined the future. Exiled from the land for 2000 years, it would always be our people’s hope to return. In 1948, the establishment of the modern State of Israel was cause to sing a new national anthem, called “HaTikvah,” the Hope.

In the 14th century, the world was torn apart by the Black Death, also called the Black Plague. It was the deadliest pandemic recorded in human history. Without science, and only religion to explain such sickness, Jews became an unfortunate and familiar scapegoat.

Church leaders placed their fate in God’s salvation. To them, this earthly realm was merely a depot, a temporary stop on their way to heaven, which was the real prize and reward for obedience to the church. Therefore, death, even by plague, was for them a sign from God. Since their fate rested with God, church leaders persisted in providing all rites and rituals,

including communion, hand to mouth. The result was wide-spread disease and millions of dead.

Even in 14th century Europe, Judaism shuddered at such religious thought. Judaism does not claim that this world is a depot before a heavenly reward. Though we speak of “*olam habah*,” the world-to-come, Jews live in the here-and-now; and, Jews value health and well-being as Judaism’s highest priorities. It is for this world that God’s Torah was given. It is for this world that we cling to health and everything we can to preserve life for as long as we can have it.

What comes after this life can only be a matter of some speculation, but Judaism isn’t without answers. Briefly, traditional Judaism adheres to resurrection, which promises life at the end of days; and, modern Judaism observes that only the physical body is interred in the earth while the soul returns to God, Who gave it. Judaism cherishes life and to the extent that we can save a life by preventing illness, we fulfill Judaism’s highest priority in covenant with God.

Therefore, it seems completely dumbfounding that faith --- any faith today --- would deny the scientific method by placing religious faithfulness, alone, above all else. Is the reward of heaven greater than the meaning of life? Do the faithful serve God more in heaven than in duties to each other on earth? Do they honor God by denying God’s gifts to us: the discovery of the scientific method, the wonders of the cosmos, the power of medicine and preventative health?

Perhaps it isn’t a rabbi, but a doctor who should examine the answers to these questions. Dr. Bernard Lown, world-renown physician and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, writes in his book, “*The Lost Art of Healing: Practicing Compassionate Medicine*” (1996), about doctors who are loyal to their calling, and who “[crave] certainty while immersed in doubt” (p.120). And, yet, he urges that “doubt cannot delay the necessity to heal.” The ache, that Lown describes, isn’t just the physical ailment of a sick patient. It’s the real ache that we’ve felt in this time of uncertainty, too. Likewise, our angst and pessimism cannot delay the necessity to choose life and to do it with renewed faith, for the sake of health. When he writes more than 20 years ago, that “the ache will not wait for the definitive study that is years away, and many clinical problems are unique,” he sounds prophetic. Instead, I believe that he’s exceptionally observant about our constant and deepest desire to live without pain, without fear, and without uncertainty; and, he’s exceptionally honest about aiming to heal the wound that that observation creates. “When confronting uncertainty,” he explains, “the physician has to be an ombudsman for the patient. But advocacy requires caring.”

Though Lown speaks about medicine, he opens a door into faith’s domain. It’s where healing the human spirit and restoring the human-will invites us to contribute to our own well-being. That is, if advocacy requires caring, then it shouldn’t reside in the hands of doctors, alone. If we accept agency for our own well-being, then we must advocate for ourselves by caring essentially and deeply for ourselves, first. When we do care for ourselves first, we don’t deny that others depend us, too; but, by administering to our sense of self-worth and self-love, we are better able to assist those who will call on us. Then we become advocates for healing by caring, too.

As Jews, we seek the best scientific advice and health policies for all people. At the recommendations of experts in their fields of medicine, we wear masks, physically distance, wash hands, and take every reasonable precaution --- including livestreaming High Holy Day

services --- until we can safely gather, again. Every day, in prosperity or adversity, good or evil, we are commanded to "Choose life!", and, we do.

These are foundations on which we build hope. These are the enduring Jewish values that we use, no different than our ancestors, to lift ourselves up to find our way, again.

Though we are hopeful people, I am not naïve. Silver linings are not always enough to appease us. These silver linings came at a price. I've stood with you at the graveside when only ten people could gather instead of hundreds in the sanctuary to honor and memorialize your beloved dead. I've stood under trees in backyards to unite couples in marriage instead of the ballroom with family and friends. I've blessed babies with my hands extended into the Zoom screen as if to hold their head in my hands. Rabbi Scott did a driveway bar mitzvah, and Cantor Trompeter is singing in a plexiglass box. Have we gone mad? Not really.

This Rosh Hashanah, the sweetness that we wish each other will come despite every reason we've had to think it wouldn't come. Therein lies the Jewish hope that belies our Jewish history. The rabbis of old taught, "Noflim v'omdim," we fall and we rise. It isn't that others can't rise up, too, but Judaism thrives on hopefulness that is found, not in the hereafter, but in the days that we've been given.

In the ten days between now and Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, let us find the words and the ways to forgive each other; and, if we will be healed of our spiritual ache and profound feelings of loss, let us also forgive ourselves. Then, I do believe, that the good wishes we extend to each other for a sweet, good, and prosperous year, will be sincere and that in their wake we might also know in our hearts and souls the blessing of peace. Amen. Shanah Tovah.