

Sermon: How Is Your Shalom?
Yom Kippur 5781
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“How are you?” During this turbulent time, these words carry so much weight. Pre-Covid, much of the time, “How are you?” was a simple greeting....an extended way of saying, “Hello” and then moving into the conversation. However, today, the answer to “How are you?” for many of us is more complicated....heavier. I know that in many of the conversations that I have had over these past several months, when I have asked someone “How are you?” there is often a brief and knowing pause. And in it, a mutual acknowledgement of the reality that – no matter how relatively good things may be for either of us – if we were to be completely honest - there is much that we could say to one another in response.

As a language, Hebrew is remarkable in that, frequently, it shines added light onto words or phrases – oftentimes revealing deeper meanings. In Hebrew, there are, for example, many different ways to ask how someone is doing. One may say: “*Mah Nishma*”: literally, “What is heard (about you)?” or “*Mah HaInyanim?*”: “What are the matters (going on in your life)? There is “*Mah HaMatzav?*”: “What is your situation?” and there is “*Mah Korei?*”: “What’s happening?” However, the most common opening words of personal inquiry are also perhaps the most revealing with regards to their essential meaning: “*Mah Sh’lomeich?*” - when asked of a woman - and “*Mah Shlom’cha?*” - when asked of a man. While these words do ask: “How are you?” their literal meaning is telling: “How is your Shalom?”....“How is your peace?”

These days, I think it safe to say that, for many of us, our peace is not good.

Indeed, how could it be? The pandemic is either impacting or taking the lives of neighbors, friends, family members, and many among us. There is illness - serious illness. We are worried about the health and safety of the most physically vulnerable in our communities. We are concerned about our children - with parents struggling to make the best decisions for their families. Financial insecurity is on the rise as unemployment and reduced-employment spread. As Rabbi Julie shared last week, there is loneliness. And, at the very same time, all of us, in some way, are struggling to manage the loss of our normal routine: our special life celebrations, our ability to gather with others and travel and just be with others, our ability to live as we normally do.

Were this all that there was, as our rabbis would say: “Dayeinu” – “It’s enough, already.” But, as we know, there is more. Justice Ginsburg’s passing has moved our nation into mourning. Racial INjustice in our country is weighing heavily. Wildfires in the west continue uncontrolled. Hurricanes are battering the Gulf Coast causing flooding and displacement. And, in a few weeks, in case anyone missed it, an election looms that is generating more than its fair share of angst.

Is it any wonder that we are weary, worried, and overwhelmed?

Centuries ago, a Buddhist monk by the name of Kamo-no-Chomei wrote an epic Japanese work in response to many crises that he had personally experienced all-at-one-time. Written in 1204, Chomei’s book is entitled: *Hajoki – Visions of a Torn World*. In it, Chomei speaks of his

physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle living in a world of calamity. Specifically, in his home region of Kyoto, Chomei bore witness to, among other catastrophes: plague, fires, what he described as ‘a destructive whirlwind,’ and civil dislocation.

Reflecting upon his reality and with Buddhist simplicity, Chomei wrote:

*...Our life is hard in this world...
To **understand** the world of today
(one must) hold it up to the world of long ago....*

And in addressing his plight and the plight of all those who had endured the suffering around him, he asked:

*Where should we live and how?
Where to find a place to rest a while?
And how to bring even short-lived peace to our hearts?*

Chomei’s questions echo our own, as we too seek understanding and strength. And like Chomei, our rabbis also invited us to consider our past as a source of solace during challenging times.

One need only look to the Torah, our people’s primary source of wisdom to discover numerous examples of how chaos may yet eventually beget order. In the story of Adam and Eve, for example, it is their disobedience to God and eventual expulsion from Eden that causes a rupture to God’s divine plan. It then becomes their task and the task of the generations that follow after them to build a creative life for themselves in the world that they had left to them. Which, as we learn, they do.

Similarly, in the story of the Binding of Isaac, the Torah portion that we read during these Holy Days, we see in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son a family crisis which, by extension, could actually be understood as a national crisis. Abraham’s gesture, regardless of his purportedly pious intent, in the end, disassociates him from Isaac for the rest of their lives. As well, according to Midrash, it is the news of what had occurred atop Mount Moriah that is the cause of his wife, Sarah’s sudden death. Here too, the covenant could have ended so-soon-after-it-had-just-started. However, according to the Torah, this first Jewish family somehow found a way to endure.

Powerfully, Jewish tradition has consistently placed hope in the heart of crisis. Perhaps this is because throughout Jewish history calamity has been a constant.

In the 6th Century BCE, the prophet Jeremiah bore witness to what our rabbis considered to have been among the most devastating losses for the Jewish people: the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of the population to Babylon. This event represented a cataclysmic break in the people’s relationship with God – who, they believed, had surely abandoned them.....as well as a profound challenge to their future.

Jeremiah, known as the “weeping prophet” because of all that he had witnessed, is traditionally said to have written the Book of Lamentations, whose opening words reflect the pain of the time:

*Alas, lonely sits the city
Once great with people!
She that was great among
the nations is like a widow.*

Yet, even at this time, amidst this darkest of experiences, Jeremiah found an inner voice of hope – preaching of love and weddings during a time when none were able to take place:

“And there shall once more be heard,” said Jeremiah, “the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing and they shall come to bring offerings of gratitude to God.” For Jeremiah, the goodness of life as it was, would return.

Part of what unquestionably inspired Jeremiah was his bearing witness to how the Jewish people had responded to exile in Babylon. While there - faced with oppression, loss of their home, and deep questions about their faith – the people, remarkably, remained determined to survive....to move forward. Recognizing the reality before them, they nonetheless found a way to marshal their resources, rebuild their community and to re-establish their belief in Judaism. According to historians, the time of the Babylonian exile saw a critical resurgence in Jewish tradition as they stood strong and survived. Indeed, it is said that it was during this period of time that the stories of the Torah were edited into their final form: intended, going forward, to be a literary source of resilience to which the Jewish people would always be able to look throughout its history.

Given all of this, it is not surprising that when the Jewish people eventually did return to Judah from Babylon - renewed with Torah in hand, no less - they immediately set about the task of rebuilding the Great Temple in Jerusalem.

A spirit of hope and creative possibility-for-the-future found expression in other ways as well related to this time of crisis. The prophet Zechariah, who preached to the Jewish people upon their return from exile, highlighted this when he referred in a great speech to the Jewish people as: “*Asirei Tikva*” – “Prisoner of Hope” – a people which would be ever-tied to the possibility of redemption.

Lastly, and fittingly, even the day when we mark the destruction of the First Temple - Tisha B’Av – while still a day of fasting and mourning, rabbinically took on its own hue of hope. According to our Sages, it is on Tisha B’Av that the Messiah will be born.

Interestingly, Kamo-no-Chomei also found strength in actively responding to his reality by building. The title of his book, *Hajoki* is a Japanese word that means: “An Account of My Hut.” In Chomei’s time, and in response to crisis, he used what strength he had constructively, establishing for himself a simple hut that enabled him, in his circumstance, to literally and emotionally stand against the winds of adversity. Chomei wrote: “Such is my little home in this world.”

The reach of this essential hopeful message in the face of crisis extends well into our own time’s Jewish culture.

There is a classic Jewish joke in which scientists determine that the world is going to be destroyed by catastrophic flooding the world over in two weeks. Not one inch of land will remain and the earth will be totally under water. Nothing can be done to prevent the catastrophe. In response, all of the great religions convene their greatest leaders and call upon them to prepare their adherents for the end. Some preach repentance and speak of an afterlife. Others speak of acceptance and equanimity. But the Rabbis have a different take. Each rabbi gathers their people and gives them the following message: “We have two weeks to learn how to live underwater.”

How appropriate that call today as so many of us are struggling to keep our heads above the water. Still, meaningfully, while we might have understandable doubts about ourselves and about our prospects for the future, Jewish tradition calls upon us to continue onward. “*Asur L’Hit’ya’eish*” – “It is forbidden to despair,” taught Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, the great 18th Century sage. He, by the way, was the Rav who also famously taught that: “*Kol HaOlam Kulo Gesher Tzar M’od...*” – “The entire world is a very narrow bridge - and the most important thing is not to be overwhelmed by fear.”

On this Yom Kippur morning, as life difficulties surround us and weigh us down, our tradition calls upon us to acknowledge the challenges that we face.....to accept ‘what is,’to consider what might yet be.....and to then to gather the resources and inner strength necessary for us to build our better tomorrow.

And so, at this moment, as we consider our own response to the question: “How are you?” – “How is your peace?” – “How is your Shalom?” – may we keep in mind the counsel of Rabbi Rami Shapiro. He wrote:

Shalom is not
the absence of difficulties,
but the handling of difficulties
without loss of balance.

Shalom is not the absence of tension
but the acceptance of it as part of the Way.

Shalom is not the absence of war
but the careful waging of war
without losing one’s balance.

Shalom is not passive non-violence,
but active confrontation with truth.

Shalom is the ability to see the grain of life
and act in accord with it;
to discover that effortless effort,
action in tune with the Way of the Universe,
is the secret of both power and peace.

*Lev Tahor B'ra Li Elohim.....
V'Ruach Nachon Chadeish B'Kirbi.*

Holy One of Blessing, create within us a pure heart.....
and renew within each of us a spirit of abiding strength.

Cain Y'hi Ratzon.....Be this God's will.