

Facing a Difficult Year.....Together
Yom Kippur Sermon 5768 * Temple Beth Shalom * Rabbi Jay Perlman

A true story: Bob Tufts was a Massachusetts native who, during the 1980's, pitched in 27 major league games and is now an institutional broker. According to the records from the American Jewish Historical Society, he is one of only six major league ball players who converted to Judaism. When Tufts converted during his playing days, he was asked by the rabbi at the ceremony if he wanted to choose a Jewish name for himself – a traditional practice. Without missing a beat, Tufts replied, “Yes, I would: Sandy Koufax.”

Whether he knew it or not, even through his humorous response, Tufts was actually doing something very Jewish. According to our tradition, the act of naming someone – even oneself – is an effort to say something hopeful about the future of the one being named. When a baby, for example, is named after a loved one – it is done not only to honor the memory of the person who passed, but also to express a heartfelt hope that the qualities that made that person special will somehow find their way into this new life.

In a larger sense, we too, at this time of year, do our own kind of naming. During the Holy Days, it is traditional as we meet and speak with one another, for us to give names of hope to the year ahead: “*Shanah Tovah*” – “A Good year” ---- “*Shanah Metukah*” – “A sweet year.” - “*Shanah shel Bri'ut*” – “A healthy year.” These names – these thoughtful expressions of the season - are our way of praying that these qualities: goodness, sweetness, and good health – will somehow find their way into this new year.

And yet.....what if we know.....what if we already know as we enter this year that, for us, the coming months really won't be defined by goodness....or sweetness.....or by good health? What if I already know – that, either in my own life or in the life of someone I love – the coming year is going to be really hard? How am I to enter this new year? What blessing is there for me?

As rabbi of this wonderful congregation for the past four years now – having been privileged to share in the lives – to learn the life stories of so many – this *yontif*, I find myself particularly mindful of the reality that this will be a very difficult year for many who are amongst us.

In truth, our Jewish tradition understands this as well. For if we pause for a moment to listen carefully amidst the sounds of this season --- in between the joy filled greetings and the dippings of the apples in honey --- if we listen closely, we will probably be surprised to hear yet another sound. It is that of a woman crying.

One of the Haftarah portions that we read during the Holy Days comes from the book of First Samuel and tells the story of Hannah. Beautiful and wise, Hannah is married to a Israelite man by the name of Elkanah. Yet despite all else that is good in her life, we learn that what Hannah wants above all else, is to be a mother. Months of trying turn into years and Hannah remains without children.

Gradually, Hannah falls into a despair that leaves her not only in tears, but unwilling to eat as well. Elkanah – her husband - comes to console her. And with loving words, he is able to get her to rise up from her place and share a meal with him.

Yet, not surprisingly, Hannah's sadness returns – and she becomes consumed by her despair. One day, Hannah decides to make her way to the entrance of the ancient temple. And when she arrives, Hannah once again breaks down. The Hebrew of the text is so powerful as we can imagine Hannah on her knees:

*Vihi marat nephesh.....*And Hannah was filled with a bitterness in her soul.
*Va'titpallel al Adonai.....u'va'choh tivkeh.....*And so she prayed to
G-d.....weeping all the while.

In fact, at this moment, Hannah's cries are all that can be heard. For, we read in this passage that, while Hannah's lips move, she speaks her words to G-d only in her heart – in private. Indeed, Hannah is the first person in the entire Bible offer a silent prayer to G-d.

Our rabbis tell us that the sound of Hannah's sadness continues to echo throughout the generations --- and is supposed to be heard by each at the beginning of each new year. We are asked to listen to Hannah's cry as we read her story. We are asked to listen to Hannah's cry when we listen to the shofar – a sound that the Talmud likens to the trembling voice of one who is in tears. We are asked to listen to Hannah's cry as we consider our own needs.....our own questions.....our own concerns for the year ahead.

But why? Why call our attention to tears in the midst of a time of sweetness? Because Judaism understands that while sweetness perhaps will and certainly SHOULD be part of our lives....for many of us, it may be out of our reach. We hear the cries of Hannah to remind us that we are not alone.....that our Judaism understands, and that, perhaps, through Hannah's story, we might find a measure of insight and comfort.

Returning to that story we learn that.....following Hannah's heartfelt prayers to G-d, she is then approached by a man by the name of Eli. Eli, an Israelite priest in the temple, notices Hannah weeping and speaking seemingly to herself. He asks her what had happened. Appreciating his kindness, Hannah chooses to tell Eli only that she had been speaking to G-d in her heart. Eli listens carefully to Hannah's words and then - compassionately - expresses his hope that G-d will hear her prayers. Before departing, Eli wishes her peace.

Following these conversations.....one with G-d....and one with Eli.....the text tells us, remarkably – and specifically...that Hannah then rose from her place.....had something to eat – and, again in the Hebrew: “*U'fa'ne'ha lo ha'yu lah od*” – literally: “she was no longer downcast.”

It is HERE that we find the power of this story. For while it IS true that several months later Hannah does learn that she is to give birth to a boy she eventually names Samuel – at the time that Hannah is able to find comfort – to rise up from her despair and to live her life - Hannah is not aware of what her future would bring.

No...in our passage – in this passage of tears that we hear at this season - Hannah's source of consolation.....and of strength.....comes from her reaching out in two specific directions:...one – towards people: specifically to Elkanah and Eli...and the other: towards G-d.

According to our rabbis, it is precisely during this season that we are reminded that G-d remains very close to us. As we know, fall is the time when we think most about Avraham....or Abraham – the first person to share in a Jewish relationship with G-d. It is his story that we read on the morning of Rosh Hashanah. There is a beautiful rabbinic teaching that plays on Avraham's name. It says that at this time G-d is, for us – an “Av Rechem”....literally, “a compassionate father.” It is very much in keeping with our High Holy Day image of G-d as “Avinu” – “our father” or “our parent.”

The comfort that comes with considering the closeness of G-d has been taught by many teachers – in many different ways. Well known author and minister Robert Fulghum was once asked in an interview: “Mr. Fulghum, do you believe in G-d?”

Fulghum's response was “No.....But I do believe in Howard.”

“Howard?” the interviewer asked, “You believe in Howard?”

Fulghum explained: “It all has to do with my mother's maiden name.”

“Your mother's maiden name....” – the journalist pushed.

“Was Howard.” Fulghum replied,

“You see she came from a big Memphis clan that was pretty close and was referred to as the Howard family. As a small child, I thought of myself as a member of the Howard family because it was often an item of conversation as in ‘The Howard Family is getting together,’ and ‘The Howard Family thinks people should write letters to their grandmother,’ The matriarch, my grandmother, was referred to as Mother Howard.”

“And,” the journalist interrupted, “you thought....she....wasG-d?”

“No, no!” Fulghum continued, “I just wanted you to first know how it happened that Howard was a name that was important to me from early on in my life. What happened was that I got packed off to Sunday school at around the age of four and the first thing I heard was the Lord's Prayer, which begins: “Our Father, which art in heaven, HOWARD be Thy name.”

And since little kids tend to mutter prayers anyhow, nobody realized what I was saying, so I went right on believing that G-d's name was Howard. And believing I was a member of HIS family – the Howards!

Since I was told that my grandfather had died and gone to heaven, my grandfather and G-d got all mixed up in my mind as one and the same. Which meant that I had a pretty comfy notion about G-d. When I knelt beside my bed each night and prayed, 'Our Father, which art in heaven, Howard be Thy name,' I thought about my grandfather and what a big shot he was. I went to bed feeling pretty well connected to the universe for a long, long time."

G-d.....our father.....*avinu*....

Yet regardless of what we might believe or not believe about the nature of G-d, most of us, I would guess, at one time or another, have been moved by a heartfelt and honest prayer spoken during a time of need. I think, as one example, of the prayer for healing – and what those words mean not only for those who speak them....but also for those on whose behalf they are spoken. That moment during our service - for example - when we think about those we love who are facing illness and life difficulty is both powerful and profound. *Mi Shebeirach* – we pray - *Avoteinu v'Imoteinu*.....May the G-d of our Ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob....Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.....please....bless sent your blessing to _____.

We recognize that the importance of our prayer is not in the expectation it will somehow change a diagnosis of cancer. For it won't. Nor will our words prevent hospice from having to come.....Nor will they mend a marriage that has been either strained or broken..... But our prayers to G-d can touch our soul.....They can remind us that no matter our struggle -- we are not alone.....And they can help us to connect with something within that might somehow help us take the next step forward.....

A member of our congregation shared with me the following note from her cousin who is being treated for lymphoma and who was visited in the hospital by her rabbi at this time last year....

'Before the transplant my rabbi came in to say a special prayer for me. She said some beautiful words, some very meaningful prayers, and then had me whisper my own prayer into the shofar that she had brought with her. She then took the shofar over to the window - faced east - she blew out some notes – allowing my prayers – she said - to go up to G-d. It was deeply moving.'

Our cries at this season....mingle with those of Hannah. As she reached out to G-d, so too are we invited to reach out to G-d. At the same time, though, we also recall that Hannah reached out in a second direction.....specifically, to Elkanah and Eli.....to others – to those who were closest to her. Hannah was able to find comfort in the embrace of her family...and her community.....She found strength because of their support. So too, we are reminded, may we.

Indeed, we know that whenever people ask themselves the question: "How am I ever ever to make it though this? The answer is never "alone."

Six months ago, Emily and I learned that a friend of ours from St. Louis, Marla Scissors, had been diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, ALS – also known as “Lou Gherig’s Disease.” ALS is a progressive and fatal illness of the neurological system – gradually causing the atrophy of muscles throughout the body.

Over these past few months, Emily and I – along with all of Marla’s friends – have been receiving regular updates about her condition. Marla’s most recent e-mail – shared with her permission – said the following.....

Dear Family and Friends.....I hope that your summer finds you all well and not in the horrible heat like we have here.

This summer I have seen so many of you as you have stopped by with lunch or a visit or participated in the walk for ALS. We have laughed and remembered and tried to come to grips with this terrible disease. That is a challenge we will continue to face.

I am now getting around with my leg braces and a walker. I am unable to take any steps without holding on to something. Most ramps or small slopes are a challenge to me because of the muscle weakness in my legs. I can’t walk very far at any given time. My arms don’t reach for things like they used to and I can feel them weakening. Thank G-d that my swallowing and breathing are still in good shape. My voice, though, does get tired after a while.....

Through many different people I continue to receive your warm thoughts and wishes. I hold them close to my heart and my family and I am able to get through this because everywhere we go we see someone who expresses their love and support. It’s amazing how many offers I have received to do my laundry. There are good days and bad days as I know there will continue to be. However, with all of you by my side I am able to get through and make the bad days go by quickly.

Marla then concluded her e-mail, saying:

As we approach the holiday season, I wonder about the phrase: “who will be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year.” It has taken on new meaning for me.

I wish that you and your families will have a healthy and peaceful New Year. I thank you all for your kindness and generosity.....With much love.....Marla

As we enter this new year.....a year that we know for many of us WILL be hard.....our Holiest of Days reminds us of the blessings of comfort.....of solace.....and of strength.....that we are able to both receive.....and give. During even the most difficult of times, it is with our families....with our friends.....with our community....that we walk together.....one step at a time.....one day at a time.

Considering the coming year, words from the pen of the poet offer us an added measure of insight.....They recall a moment in the life of the distinguished violinist Yitzhak Perlman:

Yitzhak Perlman walks the stage with braces on both legs - on two crutches.

He takes his seat - unhinges the clasps on his legs - tucking one leg back - extending the other.....

Laying down his crutches, he places the violin under his chin.

On one occasion, one of his violin strings broke.

The audience grew silent.

(But) the violinist didn't leave the stage.

Signaling the maestro,
the violinist played with intensity on only three strings.

With three strings he modulated, changed, and
re-composed the piece in his head.

He retuned the strings to get different sounds,
tuning them upward and downward.

The audience cheered with delight....
Applauded their appreciation

Asked later how he had accomplished this feat,
the violinist answered:

“It is my task to make music with what remains....”

On this Yom Kippur morning, while I do wish you all a Shanah Tovah...a good, sweet,
and healthy year.....for all of us for whom such blessings may be out of reach....I wish
you more....

May this be for you a year of love – of moments of light that somehow
illumine the shadows surrounding you.

May it be a year when family and friends and community ease your burden –
bringing added strength to your steps – added courage to your life.

And may it be for you as well a year when you feel G-d's presence near
you.....hearing your cry....comforting your soul.....bringing you peace....*Amen.*