

Seeing the Forest for the Trees

When we sat here together last Yom Kippur, we could not have known that barely one month later, a hurricane would touch land in Cuba, make its way up the Eastern Coast of the United States and Canada, killing 187 people. Hurricane Sandy, classified as a post-tropical cyclone, killed 117 Americans, mostly in low-lying sections of New York and New Jersey. Neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Staten Island were devastated. The scope and cost of the recovery was estimated to cost as much as \$50 billion.

Gathered that day for Yom Kippur services, we said the words of the *unetaneh tokef- who shall live and who shall die; who by fire, and who by water*. But we could not have imagined, we couldn't possibly have known, what nature was planning. How can we ever know what a New Year will bring?

A year has passed, and for most of us, certainly for New Englanders, whose lives were not severely affected by that particular natural disaster, and even for many New Yorkers, the memory of it has begun to fade. Power was restored, the NY Stock Exchange, closed for two consecutive days for the first time in its history, reopened; the New York City subway, which suffered its greatest damage in its 107 year history, resumed full service; and gradually, infrastructure and homes are being rebuilt. More recent events- Newtown Connecticut, the Boston Marathon, chemical weapons used on civilians in Syria, senseless, tragic events- have eclipsed our memories of a mere hurricane, though it happened not even a year ago.

However, for others, whose lives were changed by that storm, there will always be a before and an after. Before a loved-one was trapped in a flood-filled basement, and after. Before a home or a business was destroyed, and after. And in this, there is a commonality shared by us all, that life can be divided into periods of before and after: Before the diagnosis, before he left the marriage, before that accident, and after. Life can change for any of us in an instant. And even when we recover, we continue to live with its reverberations for a long time, sometimes for the rest of our lives.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, the half-life of destruction and loss was discovered to have persisted, months later, in an unexpected way. A New York Times article reported that, as fall turned to winter and winter turned to spring, residents of those neighborhoods that had borne the worst of the flooding discovered that trees and shrubs were failing to wake up from their winter slumber. 7,000 trees in New York City showed signs of stress and abnormal leafing; roughly 2,000 were presumed dead. And those numbers did not include trees on private property. The extent of the damage was unanticipated. On the Lower East Side, ghostly branches arched over the FDR Drive. In nearby East River Park, there were dozens of trees with few or no leaves, evoking winter, even as toddlers played at a sprinkler under the spring sun.

The culprit, most likely, was the brackish water that had flooded these neighborhoods. The waters eventually receded, but not after leaving the soil with a legacy of salt, which can dry-up and kill the life-sustaining roots of plants, both large and small. Their resilience depends on many factors. According to an arborist quoted in the Times, “Why some plants survived and others did not remains a mystery.” It depends on the species, and how much stress a plant was under before the storm. Where privately owned plants may be coddled, “a street tree has to fend for itself, and they’re very resilient,” he said. “Until something like this happens.”

When I read that sentence in the paper, it occurred to me how much like those trees we are. Resilience- the ability to withstand, to maintain our balance, to move forward, after having received an unexpected blow. What accounts for our resilience, or for our lack of it? Why is it that the losses and disappointments that we experience may leave some of us battered and embittered, while others among us survive, and eventually thrive?

The prophet Jeremiah speaks to us about resilience in one of my favorite passages, chapter 17: 5-8. You may be familiar with it because it is found in the haftarah that we read for parshat Bechukotai : *Cursed is he who trusts in Man, Who makes mere flesh his strength, And turns his thoughts from the Lord. He shall be like a bush in the desert, which does not sense the coming of good: It is set in the scorched places in the wilderness, in a barren land without inhabitant.*

Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord, Whose trust is the Lord alone. He shall be like a tree planted by waters, Sending forth its roots by a stream: It does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh; It has no care in a year of drought, it does not cease to yield fruit.

Why are some of us like a bush in the desert, stunted, struggling to hang on, while other among us are like trees planted by waters, undaunted and unafraid of drought, equipped with deep and sustaining roots?

What I hear in Jeremiah's words is a teaching about faith, about knowing that you are connected to something greater than oneself. If I think that my life is primarily about my own comfort and safety then I will live in fear of the inevitable salt that will threaten my security. And, no doubt about it, we will all get our share of salt in this life. But if I see myself as part of something larger, then the decisions I make, the attitude I cultivate and the acts of loving

kindness with which I respond, can sweeten the salt. Or, in the words of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, *Maavirin et Hagezara, transform the harshness of our destiny.*

Let me tell you about something that happened in my backyard this spring. When I moved into my house eight years ago, the landscaper planted a row of four trees against the back fence. He told me that these were fast growing trees, and that they would quickly begin to provide us both with shade from the sun and with privacy from our neighbors. Sure enough, the trees grew rapidly over the years. From my kitchen window, I look for them to wake up and bud as one of the first signs of spring. This year, however, something strange happened. A few weeks after the first leaves appeared, I was alarmed to notice that one of the trees was completely bare- not a single leaf left on it. It looked more like a tree in February than in May. The culprit was not hard to detect; the tree was covered with hundreds of caterpillars that had picked its branches clean. Why they attacked this tree so voraciously, and not the others, I had no idea. And I had no idea whether the tree, which would obviously give no shade this season, was perhaps really dead for good. So, I did what any of you would do. I walked to my desk, opened up my computer and Googled, “caterpillars eating up my tree.” And this is what I learned: My tree was not dead. In fact, if it was well watered and had deep roots, it would likely have the strength to sprout a whole second set of leaves in a couple of weeks, after the height of the caterpillar season had passed.

So I watered the tree, nourishing its roots, and hoped for the best. Sure enough, the tree claimed its second chance, and sprouted a whole new set of leaves. Seeing this happen was like a *mechayei hametim* moment really, a revival from the dead.

How do we water our own roots?

On Yom Kippur, we confront our day of death. We starve our bodies, we recite Yizkor for our departed, and the Vidui, the confession of sins, just as we are commanded to do when we prepare to die. It is traditional to wear a white kittel today, to remind us of the shroud in which we will one day be buried. The morning Torah reading begins with the death of Aaron's sons. And near the beginning of the Musaf Amidah, we recite once again the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, just as we did on Rosh Hashannah: Who shall live and who shall die.

And yet, you are mistaken if you think that the purpose of this day and its liturgy is simply to frighten us into submission, to numb us with its vision of death. It is really to prepare us for waking up in our lives.

Take a closer look at the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer. Other religious traditions envision a similar Judgement Day as occurring at the end of days, when it will be too late to do anything about it, when the wicked will be punished and the just rewarded, but when *change* will no longer be an option. Our Judgement Day, however, doesn't occur when it's all over, but now, in the middle of our lives, each year, as we celebrate the beginning of a new year. The author of *Unetaneh Tokef* takes our breath away, and then suddenly pulls us back from the brink, to the here and now of this moment, with the words, *U'Teshuva, U'tefillah, U'tzedakah*: But Repentance, Prayer and acts of charity can change us, and the course of our year to come.

Yom Kippur teaches us not to squander even a day, because our days will inevitably end. We water our roots by cultivating the daily practices of kindness, and gratitude love and love; practices that strengthen our connection to the infinite web of life that holds us and that grants life meaning.

A rabbinical colleague of mine knows something about resilience. Her college-age son is fighting a rare cancer. After eight months of remission, the cancer returned, and Margo and her family felt overwhelmed. How do you tread water in the midst of a swirling ocean? How do you find safety in the midst of a storm? She writes, "Resilience is the ability to say YES to life, even when death's jaws are gnawing hungrily outside your door... We can so easily die while yet drawing breath, falling victim to fear, shrinking into our most humorless selves. Life's disappointments, challenges and horrors can tear us down and paralyze us. We suffer an untimely death within, even as all the world thinks we are, somehow, still breathing. OR we can choose to LIVE as long as we are still alive: to follow our passions, contribute to the world, and to learn how to love a little better each day."

Several months after the tsunami that devastated the Japanese coast a few years ago, the Dali Lama visited the fishing village of Ishinomaki. What was once a thriving network of schools and homes was now just rubble. When he got out of his car and approached the hundreds of citizens who had gathered to hear him, he asked them how they were doing. Many just broke down and cried. The Dali Lama cried with them. And then he said, "Please help everyone else and work hard. This is the best offering you can make to the dead." And, my friends, it is the best healing we can offer to our own injured hearts. *U'tzedakah maavirin et roah hagzerah: Acts of kindness can annul the severity of the decree.*

Rabbi Kushner likes to tell of a classic psychology experiment in which a researcher was trying to determine how long someone could keep his foot in a bucket of ice water (from this, he says, you get a PhD!) To his surprise, the researcher discovered that when there was another person in the room, it was possible for someone to keep his foot in the bucket for twice as long.

There is a Hebrew expression that describes this phenomenon: *Tsarat Rabim HatzitNechama*:
Troubles shared are troubles halved.

Many of you know that I was in Israel a few months ago when, quite unexpectedly, my family suffered a terrible tragedy. My niece Liel died from a seizure at the age of 15. Liel lived courageously her whole life with disabilities that included a serious congenital heart issue, and a diagnosis of autism. She endured several heart surgeries. She was the youngest of three siblings, and her older brother and sister doted upon her. Her parents, Mike and Leora, were always afraid that trouble with her heart might one day prove fatal. In the end, however, Liel died from a seizure disorder, which she had only recently developed during adolescence. She hated losing control during a seizure, and learned to brace herself or lie down if she felt one coming on. But the doctors were never able to really control them medically, and they got worse. The final seizure caused her breathing to stop, and by the time the doctors revived her, it was just too late- she had lost too much oxygen to revive brain function.

Two days later, I arrived at the hospital in Nahariya where the rest of the family was already gathered. Leora and Michael were determined to donate Liel's young, healthy organs. But for now, they were waiting, waiting for the doctors to go through whatever procedures they had to in order to declare what we already knew to be the awful truth- that Liel would never wake up.

Hospital waiting areas are rarely pleasant places; in Nahariyah, it wasn't even a room. It was just a couple of banks of chairs in the lobby, by the steps. Our family occupied most of the seats, and in the two remaining seats, sat an Arab couple, quiet and stone-faced, like us. Clearly, they too, were waiting for news of some kind about a loved one.

The man appeared to be a laborer: his clothes were dirty, and his sweater was torn. He had a thick, vaguely menacing, moustache. The woman was dressed in traditional Arab style, in a brown material, pretty much covered from head to toe. I sensed that one of my sisters was uncomfortable with them sharing our space, which only added to the awkward silence.

An elderly Chassid with a white beard approached our group with a pushke- a charity box. In Hebrew, he offered to say a prayer for the sick on behalf of our loved ones, and proffered the tzedaka box in our direction for a donation. But we declined his offer politely, knowing, but not wanting to have to explain to a stranger, that prayers could no longer help our Liel. Nor was this is how any of us would choose to allocate our charity.

And then the Arab, with the dirty, torn sweater, stood up and took some coins from his pocket and put them in the Chassid's pushke. He gave the man the name of his sick daughter. And the Chassid respectfully and earnestly, said a mishebeirach, inserting the Arabic name of a Muslim child. And with a sympathetic smile, he walked away.

The ice broken, the gentleman spoke to us and shared a little of their story. Yes, it was their young daughter who lay ill upstairs. They are Muslims, but very glad to accept the Jewish prayer of the Chassid. In fact, his wife's mother was a Jew, who had come to Israel from North Africa, and converted to Islam to marry. The families are still in touch. In fact, there is a synagogue full of Jewish relatives on his wife's side, in another part of the country, who pray for their daughter daily.

We soon shifted back into our group silence, but something palpable had shifted. An almost unfathomable thing had occurred, simply, without fanfare or warning; a reaching out across divides of culture and preconception, an unexpected penetration through walls of sadness

and pain. And, in that brief, unanticipated moment of connection, we felt, uplifted, supported, and comforted.

I felt sorry, maybe even embarrassed, that I had brushed off the chassid. What harm would it have done to the cause of religious pluralism in Israel to have given him a few shekels? And, in my constricted state of sadness, I had forgotten something that I should really have known: that words of prayer can hold us, connect us, and heal us, even when there is no expectation that its specific request can possibly be answered.

Eventually, the doctors declared as a legal fact what had already broken our hearts. Leora and Mike were adamant that Liel's organs be donated, and so Liel's body needed to be transferred to a hospital that was equipped to harvest them. In the next few days, their generous act saved four lives. Michael and Leora's decision to donate Liel's organs was more unusual in Israel than it would be here, because many Israelis still feel that organ donation violates Jewish tradition. According to many contemporary Rabbinic authorities, however, it does not. It is actually a mitzvah, a positive commandment, under the principle of pikuach nefesh, the commandment to rescue imperiled life. This act of compassion brought great comfort to Michael and Leora, and continues to invest Liel's life with meaning and blessing.

A final word about the tree in my back yard. You remember- the tree that pushed out a second set of leaves after having been eaten bare. I recently shared my story with an audience, and a gentleman came up to me afterwards. He knows a lot about horticulture, and he wanted to add something to my story. "You may be interested to know," he said, that when a tree refoliates that way, the new leaves are not the same chemically as the old ones. Their make-up has been altered, so they're more resistant, better equipped to withstand the caterpillars."

They say that's true about the human body, too, that when we break a bone, the bone heals stronger than before.

I believe that that can be true for the human spirit, as well. But only if we continually nurture the roots that sustain us, that hold us in life. Cultivate gratitude more. Give of yourself more. Listen more. Love more.

U'teshuvah- Turning back to our best intentions;

U'tefillah- Allowing ourselves to rest in a power greater than ourselves;

U'tzedakah- acting with righteousness and lovingkindness;

maavirin et roah hagezera: Can give us the resilience to say yes to life, and to thrive.

L'Shannah Tovah Techateimu.