

Rosh Hashanah Morning, 5770
(September, 2009)
Faith and Action in Uncertain Times

Shanah Tovah.

I would venture that none of us have gotten through the year without the financial crisis affecting us, or people close to us. For the fortunate it may be about doing without some luxuries: eating out less, buying used, or avoiding unnecessary travel. I am reminded of a recent blog post of a successful journalist; the byline read:

He's followed in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, retraced Leif Ericsson's journey to the New World in an authentic replica of a Viking merchant ship, and has written about the ecology of the Everglades... These days, he's finding adventure of a different kind—living within his means.

At the other end of the spectrum are stories like that of our dear friend Sherry, may her memory be for a blessing, who was a generous and loving caretaker for children in our congregation. A victim of predatory loan practices, she was already struggling to avoid foreclosure, when she was diagnosed with cancer. Unable to work and without private insurance, she fell deeper into debt. Only with the dedication and help of legal aid as well as financial support from friends was she able to stave off homelessness through the last months of her life.

Stories like Sherry's, unfortunately, are not uncommon. I've spoken to individuals in our broader and local Jewish community who don't know how they will make their next mortgage payment, who have been downsized and are searching for a sense of purpose, who can't afford COBRA and so have gone months without healthcare praying that they don't get sick. Or who cannot afford their prescriptions when they do get sick. And for most of us the impact of this crisis is emotional as well as material: Our confidence may be shaken in ourselves, in our ability to house, clothe, feed and keep ourselves and our families healthy. Even to those of us who have not been as directly affected, the future no longer seems so certain.

As Jews, where do we look for stability in uncertain times? What is there to guide us? In the words of the psalmist who feels lost and unsure, *Esa eynay el he-harim me-ayin yavo ezri?* When we cast up our eyes to the mountains, from where does our help come?

We could begin with the chorus that has provided some measure of perspective to our ancestors down through the generations: we've gotten through worse. Consider the description offered by Rabbi Tom Rubinstein of Central Synagogue of just one of the great historical upheavals we've been through:

2500 years ago the foundations of our Israelite ancestors collapsed. The Kingdom of Judah was occupied by Babylonia. ...The territorial holdings God promised were in foreign hands. The holy city of Jerusalem was in ruins. The Sacred Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. The Holy of Holies in the Temple into which God descended and took residence on Yom Kippur was in flames.

Leaders of the nation were wrenched from their livelihoods, stripped of their possessions and forcibly exiled from their homes, banished to the region of present day Iraq. Many never again returned to their homes in Jerusalem.

Such an upheaval was unimaginable for them. These people, our ancestors, devastated and forlorn, had locked their vision on a comfortable and certain abundant future. Now a volcanic upheaval ripped away the anchors to which they had tethered themselves. The future became unsure. They and their children were terrified. Their world, as they knew it, had come to an end.

But Jews who escaped after the destruction ultimately transformed Judaism so that it could survive. In exile, they created rabbinic and synagogue Judaism. Later, some of their descendants returned and re-established Judaism in Israel, while others brought our faith around the world.

In our own day, faced with difficulties of our own, we must, as always, open our minds and hearts, roll up our sleeves, get to work, and create a pathway forward. In the words of my colleague, Rabbi Lenny Gordon, “Judaism, after all, is not about providing a guarantee of security; it’s about helping us to live with insecurity” – with the real world. Judaism gives us values and principles that are true and unchanging. They provide us with solid ground when we are buffeted by the storm, wisdom to calm our hearts and minds, and direction to guide our actions.

While there are many such principles in our tradition, there are three I’d like to focus on today: Shabbat, Gratitude, and Love -- and the acts that flow from them.

Though it may sound strange on these Yamim Noraiim, literally these Awesome Days that are to many the highlight of our Jewish new year, throughout the ages our sages have taught us that the most important holiday is the one that comes around every week -- Shabbat. We’re all so busy trying to get things *done* that Shabbat observance can easily fall by the wayside – and yet, our tradition teaches us, that’s the very reason we need Shabbat: Shabbat offers cessation from the chaos of the week, and has the potential to transform how we cope with the chaos when we re-enter the week. It’s a mandate to take a break from creating and changing things, from putting ourselves and our concerns at the center of the universe. Shabbat insists instead that we pay attention instead to our place in our families, communities and environment, and our relationship to our tradition and to God.

If you are not accustomed to taking time off and time out on Shabbat, indulge yourself and try it, just for one hour. Some Saturday, turn off the cel phone and the computer – just for sixty minutes. Use the time to go for a walk, enjoy some family time, meditate, or come to services for any part of the prayers or study, or – and I want to say this loudly and clear right now -- even just the oneg (special luncheon) after services. It’s a wonderful time to connect with friends and enjoy a delicious lunch.

One rabbi I know of teaches that the single most important thing any Jew can do is to light Shabbat candles. His rather subversive idea is that if you start doing just this one thing, then you’re going to have to make time for it. You might start thinking about why you’re doing it and find new meaning and pleasure in it. And then you might slow down long enough to have a nice

dinner and then maybe invite friends and family to join you. And maybe you'll enjoy the dinner so much you'll think about why you're doing that. And so on. Once you start, there's no telling where you'll stop. And each step of the way provides opportunities for meaning, connection and enriching your life.

Shabbat opens us to that which is of enduring value -- God, nature, tradition, community, family, friends and our own truest selves. Shabbat is radical, and it's vital: it can cause us to reorder and restore our priorities and our lives. In the middle of crisis, Shabbat allows us to step away and breathe for a little while. It requires us to rejoice, even as we recognize life's fragility and its difficulties. It is true that Shabbat will not miraculously make life's crises go away. But Shabbat can strengthen us; it can allow us to refocus on what is most important to us, give us a few moments of calm, and help us to enter the new week with energy and fresh purpose. And when we are feeling worn, frustrated, frazzled, trapped, depleted – these are not small gifts.

An important part of Shabbat -- from the blessings at the table over wine and bread to the prayers that fill our mouths with song at the service -- is gratitude. When we give thanks, when we bless, we tap into something primal and essential. Like fear or happiness, gratitude is a basic emotion – a universal building block of human experience. However, Robert Emmons, a psychologist who has spent years researching the nature of gratitude, notes that gratitude is different from other basic emotions in some interesting ways. To begin with, it's good for your health. Researchers who contributed to Emmons's recent book on gratitude note that positive emotions such as appreciation and gratitude can improve the heart's rhythmic functioning....A well-functioning heart, in turn, sends signals to the cognitive and emotional centers in the brain....By practicing positive emotions like gratitude, people can heal physically.

In the midst of chaos and loss, nurturing the experience of gratitude can help us to feel better. But from a Jewish perspective, more important than any health benefits is that gratitude requires action, “a mutual give-and-take and the ability to be altruistic,” as two of Emmons's other contributors put it. In other words, it's not enough to *feel* thankful, nor even enough to give praise and thanks to God; the experience of gratitude must change how we act in the world.

Traditionally, Jews use blessings to turn our attention to nearly every benefit we enjoy in the world: not only for food at meal time, but for the first flowering trees of spring, new experiences, hearing good news, seeing a friend after a long absence, and even for wearing new clothes. Each moment of blessing creates a sense of satisfaction. Each one must also spur us to action on behalf of those who have less.

It is telling that, according to Jewish law, so central is our obligation to help each other that even those receiving tzedakah are obligated to give tzedakah according to their means. In this way, our tradition also insists that no one is completely helpless. We are all capable of reaching out to others. We must nurture awareness of the blessings we enjoy and from this sense of gratitude make commitments to share whatever we have, whether a lot or a little, with those less fortunate. Across the spectrum, non-profits and Jewish social service programs serving society's most vulnerable have been hard hit by the financial crisis. Each year we have our Yom Kippur food drive and campaign for Mazon's efforts to alleviate hunger. This year, as every year, it is critically important to share what we have with those who have less.

Finally, I'd like to speak this morning about Love. Our experience of the world as Jews is rooted in our sense of God's love for us. In the evening service before reciting Shema, we daven Ahavat Olam: "With everlasting love, you love the house of Israel. Torah and mitzvot, laws and justice you have taught us." And in the morning service, Ahavah Rabah: "With an abounding love, you love us, Nurturer, our God; with great compassion do you care for us." We understand that Torah, the world around us, *life itself* – all of these are gifts borne of God's love for us. And the opportunities to learn and to do are gifts of love as well.

When we speak of God as a loving parent, as a gracious teacher, as merciful and caring, we name attributes that are our ideals for human action. If we would live Jewish lives, then, we must endeavor to be loving, gracious, merciful, caring and generous. Love as deed is the definition of the very Jewish conception of love called *chesed*.

In gentle times, it may be easy to feel a sense of God's loving presence, and acting generously may come easily for us, too. In difficult times, both the belief and acts of *chesed* may be more difficult – especially if we expect that the belief will precede, and lead to the action. But even when, and perhaps especially when, things seem to be falling apart and beyond our control, we must act. And we find, when we engage in acts of *chesed*, of decency, assistance and lovingkindness, that we are strengthened, and that our lives become governed not by an economy of scarcity, but by the experience of plenty. In his exceptional book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain, expresses the idea this way:

The difference between politics and economics on the one hand, and covenantal relationships on the other, can be seen by a simple arithmetic thought-experiment. If I have total power and then share it with nine others, I am left with only a tenth of what I had to begin with. If I have a thousand pounds and share it with nine others, again I am left with a tenth of what I had. But if I share with nine others, not power or wealth but *friendship*, or *kindness* or *influence* or *love*, I find I have not less, but more. These 'spiritual goods' are unique in that the more we share, the more we have (pp.53-54).

The questions we ask when times are difficult – What is enduring? What can be helpful? – are questions for good times, too. And, for us as Jews, the answers are before us at all times as well. Shabbat, with its mandate to step out of ordinary time, reflect and re-orient, arrives every Friday evening. Opportunities to experience and express gratitude come with each everyday activity, literally from the moment we awaken. And there is never a wrong time to understand and enact God's love by reaching out to others with deeds of *chesed*. These fundamental aspects of our tradition are not simply *beliefs*. They must be embodied; they must lead to action. In this way, Judaism leads us to transform the rhythms and experiences of lives into opportunities, even in difficult times, for rejuvenation and blessing.

Each week, as we return the Torah to the Ark, we pray, "Hashivenu, Adonai, Eilecha, Hashivenu v'nashuva. Chadesh yamenu k'kedem." Turn us toward you, God, turn us toward you and we shall truly turn. Renew our days now as in the past." This year, this new year, we pray: Source of Life, help us to return to the well which cannot be

diminished, of love and the capacity to love, of gratitude and the capacity to act. Whatever our circumstances, whatever difficulties and challenges we face, strengthen us, and help us to renew our days so that we may live lives of abiding worth. AMEN.

Shanah Tovah u'metuka!