

KOL NIDRE 2001-5762 SURVIVAL

One of my favorite rabbinic colleagues serves a congregation in Washington, D.C. Mindy always has a way of cutting through extraneous things and getting to the heart of an issue. Last week, as the rabbinic list serve was filled with postings from rabbis wondering about what to say on the high holidays in the aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy, my friend finally couldn't restrain herself and posted the following message: "It seems to me that at least some of our messages that were prepared before Sept. 11 should still have some relevance and meaning now. Why do all of my congregants keep asking me if I'm 'rewriting' all my sermons? If God, Torah, and Israel mattered last week, they'd better still matter this week; and if they don't matter this week, what good are we?" Mindy reminds us that we are still that people Israel that accepted the gift of Torah and entered into covenant with God those many years ago; we are still the people that has struggled and prayed, wrestled with angels and argued with God, and through it all, retained our sense of who we are. How have we done it, I wonder; what is it about this people Israel that we are still here? Is there truly some secret to our survival?

Part of the secret may be found in how we value the individual member of the people called Israel. Being a member of the people Israel is like having spiritual DNA; no two of us are alike and we celebrate that uniqueness. Jose bar Hanina, an ancient rabbinic sage, said that when the revelation at Sinai took place...each individual standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai heard God's words as a personal and unique address to each one alone (as quoted in Gafni, Soul Prints, p.159) Chaim Vital, a 16th century Kabbalist who lived in Galilee, expressed this idea by saying that every person has his or her own specific letter of the Bible. "My letter is not yours and yours is not mine; our sacred text is created when all the unique letters form sentences, paragraphs, chapters and ultimately an entire narrative" (as cited in Gafni). When I first came to this congregation eight years ago, one of the fifteen-year-olds took me aside and asked, a bit embarrassed, "What is my special word?" I didn't know what she was talking about; "What special word?" I asked. "The one Rabbi Gelberman told me about," she said: "At my bat

mitzvah, in front of the ark, he told me my special word but I forgot it.” I’m afraid that I couldn’t tell her what her special word was, but I do believe that she has one and that it belongs only to her. That is what makes her a necessary part of our people; that is why we value her uniqueness. It isn’t a genetic transmission; we Jews have always believed that spiritual DNA can be acquired. I believe it was Louis Brandeis who once said that he was only sorry he had been born a Jew because it prevented him from experiencing the joy of choosing Judaism. Throughout our history, however, not everyone has accepted that special identity as a welcome gift. Moses fled into the desert, hoping to escape it. Jonah ended up in the belly of the whale, trying to flee from it. Yet both ultimately accepted that they were members of this people Israel and so each had a special mission.

If part of the secret to our survival lies in the value of the individual life, another part of the secret can be found in the relationship between the individual and the community. The relationship is symbiotic: Just as being a unique individual Jew contributes to the Jewish community, so being part of the community gives added meaning to the individual sense of Jewish identity. There is a sense of purpose about being a member of the people Israel. It lets us know who we are and what is expected of us. As a people, we also have learned that we can’t run from who we are. We have learned to embrace the memories of joy and honor even the memories of tragedy, because they form the fabric of our community. Rabbi David Hartman, once a Canadian and now a distinguished Israeli modern orthodox rabbi, says that “the meaning of being a Jew is being able to embrace life amidst adversity.” We have had plenty of practice. You remember that the first set of the tablets of the covenant was smashed by Moses in his anger when he saw the Israelites praying to the Golden Calf. Our tradition says that, unlike the shards of glass after they have been stepped on at a wedding, these fragments of the tablets were saved. Rabbi Judah bar Ilai taught that two arks journeyed with Israel in the wilderness – one in which the Torah was kept and one in which the tablets broken by Moses were kept. The broken pieces

were not left behind; they, too, were honored as a part of the relationship between God and the people Israel. Rabbi Harold Kushner (p. 116 [American Rabbi](#)) wrote that he

... read recently of a social worker in Miami Beach who worked with a group of senior citizens, all of them survivors of the holocaust, now in their 70s and 80s. The group was supposed to be about keeping them informed about medical insurance, social security, assisted living, but every time they met, all they wanted to talk about was their experiences during the war. Finally in exasperation the social worker said to them, "Those must have been such awful experiences. Why do you keep dwelling on them?" One of them answered, "You're right, those years in the camps were the worst thing that ever happened to me, but they are also the most important thing that ever happened to me. Take away those memories, hide from those memories because they are so painful to remember and I'm not me anymore, I'd be somebody else.

Becoming somebody else doesn't lead to survival: the Midrash tells us that Israel was redeemed from Egypt because the Hebrew slaves did not change their names. Holding on to their identities led to their liberation and survival as a community. In the last few weeks, I have been aware more than ever of what it means to have a community with which to share pain as well as joy. A former member of mine from my previous pulpit called early one morning to tell me that his 24-year-old son had committed suicide the night before; could I officiate at his funeral. I wasn't able to. I asked if they still belonged to the Temple in Summit. No, they, had left that synagogue a few years back. My heart sank. And all I could think was: And now is the moment when you really need your synagogue. I knew they would be able to find a rabbi for the funeral; they would probably be able to find someone to borrow prayerbooks and conduct a minyan. But I wondered: where would they do their grieving after that and with whom? And then, less than a week later, I heard from another former congregant; their 29 year old son had worked at the World Trade Center and had not yet been found. They, too, had left the temple some years ago; they, too, at a time like this, had to deal with issues no one should ever have to deal with. I am

sure that the general community will support them for a period of time; but where do they go to say kaddish? And if they don't go anywhere to say kaddish, where do they put the pain? Martin Buber says that evil may be defined as the absence of relationship and direction in our lives. Being part of a covenanted community works against evil by placing us in a holy relationship to each other and to God. It means remembering and cherishing the broken as well as the whole.

What is the secret here? We know what it is to have our world shattered and to go on and bring healing, not letting the broken shards cut off our future. Our world goes on, not unchanged, but with a sense of direction and purpose. I read a story about Kafka recently, a story I had never heard before:

On his last visit to Berlin before his death from tuberculosis, Kafka happened upon a little girl crying inconsolably in the park he frequented. When he asked her why all the tears, she confided that she had lost her favorite doll. Kafka tried to comfort her. The doll was not lost at all. It had merely taken a trip and he had in fact run into it not long before. He was quite sure the doll would soon return. The next day Kafka brought the little girl a letter from her doll full of descriptions and anecdotes. And each day thereafter, he produced another letter for his newfound friend. On his last day in Berlin, Kafka came to the park once again. This time however he brought a doll with him which he tenderly presented to her. But she was not to be consoled. The doll did not resemble the one she loved so dearly. "Of course it's your doll," Kafka insisted; "The long journey and the many experiences have merely changed the way she looks" (quoted in The American Rabbi).

This people Israel has been on a long journey, too; our many experiences have changed the way we look and the way we are looked at. I hope that these recent terrible experiences help the world to look at us differently, to take us seriously and to learn from our experience. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center disaster, Naomi Ragins wrote recently on the website called JewzNewz, "Why do we have to learn these lessons of history again and again: that tolerance for

anti-Semitism and the murder of Jews inevitably leads to a hundredfold number of casualties among innocent people of all races and religions all over the world? That evil and immorality and racism always chooses the Jews as its first target, but never its last? If the attack is tolerated it grows in strength and begins to devour the rest of the world. Appeasement, Churchill said, is feeding a crocodile in the hope that he will eat you last. It doesn't work. And now, just days after the debacle in Durban which unleashed the most vicious racism of modern times, comes the physical attack on the ideal of the free world and its people."

The secret that the world can learn from this people Israel is how to make the impossible a reality. When Theodor Herzl proposed the creation of a modern Jewish State, he said, "*Im tirtzu, ayn zo aggadah.*" If you will it, it is no dream. Despite the obstacles, we have created a modern democratic state in the midst of the most anti and non-democratic countries in the world. We have absorbed refugees from the *arba canfot ha aretz*, the four corners of the world. Hebrew has once again become a living language. No one would claim Israel is without her problems, both political and social; but she is a vibrant living experiment, still trying to see what works and what doesn't. When Thomas Edison was trying to find the right material for use as a filament in an electric light bulb, it took him more than a thousand tries, using everything from metal to natural fiber to his wife's sewing thread, each time laboriously and carefully placing the new filament inside a hand-blown glass tube extracting all the air only to fail again. In an interview Edison was asked, "How could you keep on? After all, you have failed more than a thousand times?" Edison, completely taken aback, replied: "Failed! I haven't failed; I have successfully isolated one thousand items that won't work" (quoted in [American Rabbi](#), Rick Sherwin p. 341). We are a nation that knows what doesn't work; but that doesn't stop us from working toward redemption. Rabbi Laura Geller, a rabbi in San Francisco, tells a story about a woman who passed by a sign in the window of a bookstore in Berkeley: "Prayer doesn't work" That got her attention so she came closer. Underneath in smaller letters it said, "Meditation doesn't work." Then in smaller letters, "Kabbalah doesn't work. Psychiatry doesn't work." At the very

bottom of the sign were the words: “None of it works. You have to work” (quoted in American Rabbi, Laura Geller p. 83). That is a secret we have been trying to share with the world: redemption comes only with work.

The secret to the survival of this people Israel is that there is no secret. The sages taught that the Torah was given in a public place so that it would be available to the world. We have held to the eternal values of God, Torah and Israel, and have not let tragedy sway us. We remember all of the past, we live completely and fully in the present, and we work with passion to build a future. We have always known that tomorrow depends upon us. Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz at Passover would wait as do all Jews for the coming of Elijah as the forerunner of the messiah. Rabbi Naftali, however, would leave Elijah’s cup unfilled. Before the door was opened for Elijah during the seder, he would pass the empty cup around the table. Everyone there, man, woman and child would pour a portion of his or her own wine into the empty vessel. When the cup returned to Reb Naftali, he would lift it and recite: Israel will not be redeemed except through its own efforts (as told by Rabbi Harold Schulweis). We Americans will not be redeemed except through our own efforts. The human race will not be redeemed except through its own efforts. Peace will not descend on us except through our own efforts. The secret, if there is one, lies not in rewriting sermons but in rewriting tomorrow.