

Hope

Yom Kippur Evening 5770 – September 27, 2009
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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Sometimes, when you are the rabbi of a congregation, a supposedly casual conversation can turn very quickly to serious matters. One time, I was outside of the congregation when I saw someone I know from the synagogue. Of course I came over to say “Hello.” After an exchange of pleasantries, our conversation unexpectedly took on a more somber tone.

This member told me that he had just been laid off from work. He had held a prominent position, but his firm had been sold to another and he was not willing to accept a demotion to a less responsible position.

Clearly, being out of work was painful for him. We went on to talk for awhile, but then he had to get going. As we parted ways, I wished him strength as he faced this challenge in his life.

I recall another time, when I was at the grocery store and encountered a congregant I had not seen in awhile. “How are you?” I asked her. “OK,” she replied, “but it’s been tough lately.” She went on to tell me about her parents who had moved here not long ago. She told me that her father had prostate cancer and was undergoing treatment. He was responding well, although he was very weak. It strained her mother to care for him, because she also was not in the best of health. Clearly this woman felt very stressed struggling to care for her ailing parents, as well as her husband and children. I listened, and there amidst the lemons and oranges, I wished her strength as she faced this challenge in her life.

As the rabbi of a synagogue, I hear about difficult times in people’s lives. Often I am informed when a loved one is in the hospital, or when a death occurs in a member’s family. However, these two chance encounters outside the synagogue remind me that

there are times when people face difficulties, and only family and close friends know.

There are so many hard trials people face in life. Some lose their jobs, are suddenly out of work, and they experience financial burdens that were never expected. Others suffer from emotional wounds. When a marriage collapses, and a dream of happiness is shattered, somehow you have to find a way to pick up the pieces and go on.

Loss, pain, and suffering. Think back over the course of the past year -- to bad news you have heard about someone you know. Do you recall family and friends who had a sudden loss of health? Do you remember how damaging that was to a person's sense of wholeness and how their medical condition affected their outlook on the future? Reflect for a moment about this past year -- the hospital rooms you have visited, the funerals you have attended, and the shiva houses you have been in.

Now look into your own heart. Is there a single adult in this congregation who has not suffered in some way this past year? Everyone has experienced the unnerving anxiety of a harsh economic climate. At times you cannot rest because your worries are overwhelming. How am I going to make ends meet? How am I going to provide for my family? Or, for those facing a medical challenge: How am I going to find time to have this lump in my breast examined, when I have to work, and take care of my kids and my husband, and all of them are counting on me to be there for them?

I am constantly amazed at some people's strength to cope with their challenges. One woman, while working in a demanding profession and caring for her sick husband said to me, "I really don't have a choice. I just carry on."

So many soldier on, bravely. Carrying on in the line of duty -- caring for children, earning a living for the family -- many get through the day by putting one foot in front of the other until collapsing into bed at night. So many are exhausted and depleted from carrying so many responsibilities.

Some face their challenges with stoic determination. Others turn to soothing voices in the media for guidance. We learn how to cope by watching Oprah Winfrey or by tuning into Dr. Phil or by reading Dear Abby. We tell ourselves that we will learn from others who have overcome crises in their lives -- Oprah, Dr. Phil, and Abby will provide answers.

Others of us look for advice in the self-help section of the bookstores. Surely someone has written a book that will tell us exactly what ails us. Some author will give us an answer to help us cope.

Others of us turn to the Internet for answers. We surf online and enter chat rooms. We hope that there are others who have problems like us with whom we can share our problems, anonymously.

Ultimately though, a television show, a book, or a chat room, will not solve our problems. They can help us cope. They can provide us with strategies on how to face difficult times. They will not, however, answer help us resolve what is ultimately a spiritual challenge in our lives.

From a Jewish perspective, there is a hard truth about life that is not so easy to accept. This hard truth is not neatly packaged for easy consumption. Judaism acknowledges that, in life, suffering is inevitable. All human beings suffer at some point. It is part of the human condition. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Jacob's life ended not in Israel, but in Egypt. Moses, despite leading the Israelites in the Sinai desert for 40 years, was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. Loss is part and parcel of being human. Lifelong dreams can shatter. A person's total sense of well-being can vanish in an instant.

Of everyone we know in the Bible, Job faces the worst possible situation. He is a very wealthy man, yet he becomes impoverished. He is blessed with many children, however all of Job's offspring die during his lifetime. At first, Job tries to accept these punishments as God's will, yet eventually he reaches a breaking point. In deep pain he cries out, "How could you do this to me, God?" In anguish, he exclaims, "I cry out to God, but God does not answer me; I wait, but God does not consider me. God has become cruel to me" (Job 31.20-21).

None of us would ever want to be in Job's shoes. None of us would ever wish upon others or ourselves loss, illness, or death. Yet we know that in the world in which we live, misery exists. Suffering is inevitable. Why? The question is as old as creation. There are no simple answers.

When Job's friends come by to visit him, they offer theological justifications as to why Job was suffering. However, all three friends fail miserably. Job rejects each of their neatly reasoned theological

presentations. Deep down, Job knew that in his suffering, what he needed most was not an explanation of why he was suffering. What he needed was companionship and hope. Companionship, so that he did not feel abandoned in his despair. Hope, so that he could be assured that his pain would not last forever.

There are times in life when we suffer. We feel terribly alone. We are frightened. We feel punished by God and abandoned. When faced with the diagnosis of a brain tumor, how could someone not question God and ask, "Why are you doing this to me? Why are you testing me?" In the wake of an inexplicable calamity, how could we not cry out to God: "Why have you placed this burden on me?"

Judaism believes that even in the midst of suffering, God is present. As Rabbi Arthur Green has written: *God is everywhere. The One that underlies all being is to be found in moments of pain as well as times of joy, in the house of mourning as well as the house of feasting . . . While we should never look for suffering in order to find God in it, many say that they first came to a deeper spiritual consciousness in confronting terrible pain or loss.*

Rabbi Green also writes, *What does it mean to "find God" in a moment of suffering? To find God is to change perspective, even when the reality of suffering cannot be changed. It is to allow a chance for the deep force of healing that comes from a level of consciousness beyond our control or knowledge . . . This healing may take the form of accepting what cannot be changed, or coming to terms with a new situation. (Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow, Arthur Green, pp. 141-142)*

Even in the midst of suffering, God is present. We are not alone. The familiar verse from Psalm 23 proclaims: *Gam Ki Ay-lech B'gay Tzal-Mavet, Lo Ira Ra, Ki Ata Imadi - Though I walk through the valley of death, God is with me. I fear no evil. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23.4)*

God is present wherever we go in life. Judaism requires that we, like God, be present when others are in pain. We should not distance ourselves through harsh judgment. It is cruel to imply that someone who is suffering deserves his or her condition. *We must always be careful not to blame the victims, as the guilt feelings fostered and buttressed by religion have so often done. (Ibid, pg. 141)*

As Jews, we bear a responsibility to lessen the pain of others. Judaism teaches that it is a mitzvah to visit the sick and to remove

their sense of isolation. It is a commandment to come to a house of mourning and offer condolences. It is a mitzvah to provide for those who lack shelter and food and to find ways to alleviate their distress.

It is imperative that we offer hope to those who suffer, not sugar-coated visions of the future. We can gently assure those who are suffering that there will come a time when their pain will end, when suffering will cease, and joy and celebration will return. We can be God's messengers of comfort, hope, and healing.

More than twenty years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner taught us a profound lesson in his famous book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kushner instructed us that when difficult times happen in life, it is ultimately not very helpful to ask: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" In the midst of a difficult time, a better question would be: "How do I respond to this spiritual challenge in my life?" When we know someone else who is suffering, our response should be: how can I be a companion to another who is in pain and offer that person hope for a better future?

On this night of Kol Nidre, let us turn to the ancient wisdom of our people, and find strength for the challenges we will face in the year ahead. May we know in our hearts that God is always present, even in the midst of suffering. To those in despair, may we be God's messengers of hope. May we offer assurance that their pain will not last forever; God's healing presence will restore wholeness and well-being. On this holy night of Yom Kippur, let us seek God with all our hearts and minds and souls.

Adonai Oz L'Amo Yitein

May God bless us with wisdom and strength

Adonai Yevareich Et Amo Va'shalom

May God bless us with comfort and peace.

And let us say:

Amen.