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Temple Micah, Washington, DC
November 8, 2024\ Shabbat Lech Lecha

LIVE EACH DAY

Shabbat Shalom!

It was on this Shabbat, Lech Lecha, fifty-nine years ago, 1965 in Chicago that I became bar mitzvah. Lilah—Mazel Tov to you and your family.

You have an inspiring portion. Abraham sets out and, in a sense, creates the journey-- our story—that we continue to walk today.

The earliest generations of rabbis, depict Abraham as an idol smasher. An idol is any “thing” that claims to encompass everything. Jews abhor idols. We love symbols. Symbols point to something beyond. The Torah is our ultimate symbol. It is a text that is studied but never fully understood. It eternally points beyond. Lilah, I hope you can try and remember that. You are becoming bat mitzvah in a historic moment. I think we all pray that some day you will look at this moment thru the prism of Torah which will have helped guide you and others to a better day.

(PAUSE)

This is the sermon I prayed that I would never have to give.

Like you, I am numb.

I am in shock.

I sit in disbelief.

The following email captures much of what I received in response to my letter of the morning after, November 6.

“I feel despair on every level: globally, nationally, locally, and personally. (At least in 2016 the girls weren't old enough to realize that we were helpless in preventing

this/addressing it. Now, they are old enough to see that plainly and clearly for themselves.) The gravity of so much feels too much.”

I have almost stopped reading the newspapers. At Micah, a congregation full of journalists, this is close to sin territory.

The so called pundits and very smart people who share their insights, I stopped reading many months ago.

There is too much coming at us to make sense of any of it.

I literally thank God that I have no Instagram account, no Facebook page, no tic toc, no twitter, no nothing.

Even with that, the number of articles that are forwarded to me to read by so many cause me nothing but anxiety, I am recommend stopping –at least for a while.

This is a time to regain balance, seek perspective, search out ancient wisdom, and ponder.

This week I thought a lot about two recent personal experiences.

About 2 1/2 years ago, Louise and I attended a family wedding in West Palm Beach Florida. During the weekend of the wedding, as someone was not feeling well, I drove them at around 6pm to the nearest hospital with full emergency services. It was fairly close.

I sat and waited in the emergency room waiting room for about 4 1/2 hours while the person I brought was tended to. They were taken in almost immediately upon our arrival so I was alone. After about twenty minutes, I moved to sit at the closest seat that felt comfortable –both physically and emotionally –to the emergency room receiving desk.

Remember—this is in or near West Palm Beach.

The hospital staff were heroes—each and every one—knowledgeable, patient, caring and constantly busy.

The place was a constant flow of patients.

Many—perhaps even half—were known by the hospital staff. Emergency room regulars. Just think of that.

The number of drug overdoses was staggering.

The hospital workers knew the ambulance drivers-and made comments about “so and so is here again.”

There was a stab wound from a knife fight.

There was a motorcycle accident.

Many of the people coming in seemed homeless (no address for paperwork), and disoriented.

A person came in with great pain who I later learned was 4-5-months pregnant and had not seen a doctor in that time.

The volume and kind of “taken for granted normality” of what was an ongoing series of small tragedies was simply numbing.

There was no let up.

I left the hospital late that night thinking that anyone who wishes to run for any public office in this country from local school board to president of the United States should somehow be required by law to sit by themselves—no handler or spokesperson at their side—no screen to look at--in a hospital emergency room reception area for 4 or 5 hours just to get a tiny glimpse of what is going on in this country.

This was one thing I thought a lot about this week.

#2

Louise and I spent a few days after all of the holidays were over relaxing on the Delaware Eastern Shore. It was delightful. Three early mornings in a row, I went to a Royal Farms to get coffee. Three mornings in a row, I was the only customer, the same woman—older than I am was the only person working. She is doing everything—stocking, preparing food (I ordered a biscuit), and working the cash register. By the 3rd morning, I had mastered self-check-out).

Each morning, I left thinking—here I am spending \$6 or \$7 on coffee without thinking about it and I wondered what this woman, my age the very least, thought about that. What was her life story? Why was she working an early morning shift alone? How much time must she spend considering whether to spend \$6 or \$7?

I am still thinking about her and hoping her life is wonderful.

I then think about the time we all spend in front of a screen and the real lived life goes unnoticed. People go unnoticed.

I am not saying anything new here.

It can sound trite but I worry about what our lives are becoming and what our country has become without our even realizing it or perhaps more accurately,

realizing it but feeling powerless or being powerless to stop it and how that has to be part of the story of this election.

Living life thru a screen, too much of life goes unnoticed. We have to see the people around us and put our phones away. Fight that addiction and help our children do the same.

We can push ourselves to leave our tablets and computers at home. Go to the library, the store—even the mall.

We are isolated from the reality of who and what we are.

I want to urge us towards ancient insights.

We discussed this week as a full staff, Jewish resilience and Jewish historical and theological responses to setback and defeat.

In 586 BCE the Babylonian armies destroy Jerusalem.

The biblical book of Lamentations provides the theological framework for what becomes the liturgical formulation-

“Mi’pnei Chataeinu Galinu Meartzenu—Because of our sins we were exiled from our lands.”

“We own this.” “This is on us.” This was the rabbinic message of that ancient destruction.

In November, 1995, just a week after the murder in Israel of Yitzchak Rabin, I sat in my study group with a group of the wisest and smartest rabbis that I know and one of the very smarted said to us. “We each own a piece of this. Every Jew owns a piece of this.”

This is what Tanchuma (Mishpatim 2:1) is saying when the midrash teaches us—

“When a person sits in their home and says ‘what do the affairs of society have to do with me,

why should I trouble myself with the people’s voices?

Allow my soul to dwell in peace.’

One who does this overthrows the world.”

We have to find a way to leave our screens and re-enter the world.

This is different than those who say: “The coastal elites are looking down on the rest of the country.” This mantra is abhorrent to me. I find utter irony in the ones

saying this, writing this so smugly and repeatedly do so in the pages of the so-called elite publications that I choose not to read.

I am simply trying to see what our country has become.

Early this year I listened closely as America's prophet, Reverend William Barber. He observed how no political leader speaks to the poor.

In the era of my 1965 bar mitzvah, then president Lyndon Baines Johnson was waging a war on poverty. Who thinks in those terms anymore? Of the too many wars we have as a nation waged all unsuccessfully since WWII, this un-won war one has hurt us far more than any other.

(P A U S E)

Looking back to our history, Jerusalem is destroyed a second time. In 70, the Romans wreak their destruction and this time the rabbis define the sin that the Jews had committed as SINAT CHINAM—HATRED WITHOUT CAUSE—GRATUITOUS HATE—HATE FOR THE SAKE OF HATE." Jew hated Jew for no reason.

With this election, I am going to try and not let that word pass my lips.

If we ever want a campaign of love and trust to overcome a campaign of hate and lies, we have to begin somewhere. We can each try and begin with ourselves and urge those around us to do the same.

Finally—more than anything else, I have asked myself how, how do I live going forward.

Two bits of Torah:

Rabbi Gordon Tucker reminded me this week of wisdom found in the Book of Ezekiel about Truth.

We are a society that has been infected by lies and have now, once again, elected as president one who knows nothing else.

God tells Ezekiel (9:4) to walk through Jerusalem and "put a mark on the foreheads of all the men who moan and groan because of all of the abominations that are being committed." In the Bible these men are saved from the destruction. The Talmud later calls this mark, the mark of the truth tellers and teaches that truth has saving power.

EMET\Truth is one of God's names. Lying can only succeed for a short period. Truth ultimately wins out. We have to believe that. The rot and garbage embedded in lies will pile up. The coming corruption will steal all it can and an empire built on the sand of corrupt greed will crash. This is the story of every empire. The question is whether Truth can win out in time. This is an urgency of the moment. In order to declare truth, we have to see truth. We have to find a way to insist on Truth—all of us. We must relentlessly call out lies. Each of us is called now to be the strongest prophetic voice that we can be.

My second bit of wisdom (which is really another version of the first) offers a particular version of an oft repeated ancient Jewish debate—

(From Midrash Torat Kohanim (Chapter 4, Midrash 12)

“Ma hu clal gado ba Torah?”

“What is the greatest verse in Torah?”

Rabbi Akiva suggests the verse “You should love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Ben Azai offers, “These are the chronicles of the generations of Adam — on the day that God created man, He made him in His Image” (Genesis 5:1). We can easily see why these would be offered as the foundational verses of Torah. We honor the divinity within each human being.

Ben Zoma suggests Deuteronomy 6:4 as the greatest verse: “Shema Yisrael” — “Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” The absolute unity of God— from whom all creation and all morality goes forth.

End of story?

Not quite-

Rabbi Shimon Ben Pazi comes to offer:

“Kevas a echad tasim babboker v’keves ha-sheni tasim bein ha-arbaim.” “The first sheep should be brought (as an offering) in the morning and the second sheep

should be brought (as an offering) in the afternoon.” (Exodus 29:39 and Numbers 28:4)

In this story--Rabbi Ploni stands up and declares Ben Pazi the winner and cites a verse from Exodus in support. (Exodus 25:9)

Rabbi Ploni thus ends the contest and Rabbi Shimon Ben Pazi's verse is recognized as the greatest. (BTW- Ploni is usually associated as the name of an anonymous character, which seems to indicate here that it was not just another opinion, but the majority opinion—the great silent majority, in our terms.)

What was Rabbi Shimon Ben Pazi teaching?

Ben Pazi believed the only way to transform our lives in a sustainable way is through continual daily action. Believing in great religious declarations of all men created in God's image, stirring aspirations of love your neighbor as yourself or Divine proclamation such as “Shema Yisrael” are of course important. However, it is only through the day in and day out, that change in ourselves and the world can take place. It is this commitment, ability and perpetual dedication that is at the heart of a moral and spiritual life. Repeated daily actions become habits. Habits become ingrained character traits and character traits define who we are. This is the essence of Jewish life. At the end, Judaism is more about good actions than lofty thoughts—no matter how much I might offer Wittgenstein or Charles Taylor. All of this takes seeing and absorbing the reality around us.

Without this as the anchor, what we call spirituality is simply a lost unrooted abstraction. (This is my simple response to the I'm spiritual but not religious statement I have heard so often)

Our greatest occasions come and go. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are here and gone. The Passover Seder is once a year—We stand at Sinai on Shavuot—once a year and for that service, very few come.

What we live with daily are the ordinary routines of our lives. This is what Ben Paz is teaching—this is the real story of Abraham’s ancient journey that we continue today.

This is our Micah Human project in a nut shell. We seek to build character--the special secret Jewish sauce—if you will- Daily habits—daily experiencing—daily taking notice—this is our version of the morning lamb and the evening lamb.

To end then with an excerpt from my Grandpa Goldman piece which I read from now eight years ago:

"We survived because we were inveterate optimists. No obstacle stopped us, no crisis dismayed us, no catastrophe crushed us. We swallowed the bitterness of life and pursued the sweet thereof.

We survived because of Torah. We loved life and our sages knew that life needs direction, norm, discipline...We had the strength to chain the fury of passion, and the wisdom to escape quietism and negation...

We survived...because of the prophetic voices that broke out in Israel... We were blessed with men that never made peace with the foibles of the people or the whims of the rulers.

We survived because of Moses who smashed the popular golden calf, because of Nathan who pointed a finger at his king, "Thou art the guilty man"; ... There was Amos who demanded, "Let justice well up as the waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

We cannot all be Moses, Isaiahhs, Elijahs, but we dare not forget that we are the inheritors of their tradition."

I think this is the only Jewish way that we can go forward as individuals, families, communities and someday—a nation.

We don't despair,

Instead--we live our lives more fully, more decently—relentlessly seeing and acting.

We will rise.

Shabbat Shalom!