

Erev Rosh Hashanah

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Congregation Rodeph Sholom

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Just Keep Moving: Judaism and the Resiliency of our People

So, in his newest book, *Morality: Restoring The Common Good in Divided Times*, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Britain, tells the story of Yisrael Kristal, who passed away in 2017 just a month short of his 114th birthday. As Sacks related, “If you knew nothing else about him than this, you might expect to discover that he had led a peaceful life, spared of grief, fear, and danger.” Yet the truth about Kristal's life is totally opposite. He was a Holocaust survivor who spent four long years in the Lodz ghetto where his two children died and then was transferred to Auschwitz where his wife also perished. Weighing 82 pounds at liberation, he found out that he was the only member of his family to survive.

Kristal moved to Israel after the war and settled in Haifa where he remarried and started a new family. In Israel he ran a successful confectionary business and lived what most would consider a long and full life. In fact, in 2016, at the age of 113, he finally celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. Describing the death of Abraham, the text (Gen. 25:8) says that he “breathed his last and died in a good old age, old and satisfied.” Kristal too, at least according to Sacks, died just like Abraham “in the most serene way.” Yet considering that their lives were fraught with trial after trial, how is it possible to say that Abraham who faced many tests in his lifetime, and Kristal who suffered numerous tribulations during the Shoah, died “in good old age, old and satisfied”? For me this is quite a conundrum.

There have been a few very important and memorable moments in my life when I have encountered Holocaust survivors. Considering the trauma of their survival, those previous interactions—while not always the case—were among the strongest, most life-affirming situations I have ever had. They were, after all, survivors. They lived through the deepest darkness and were still able to move forward with their lives. How was this possible? From where I stand, it was because these unique individuals did not look back. Rather, they focused with single-minded intensity on the future. Wherever they settled,

the survivors were “strangers in a strange land.” Yet, many remarried, rebuilt lives and careers, and moved forward.

Yet their individual stories of resiliency and strength is nothing new to the Jewish people. Twice the great city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Once in 586 BCE, and again in the year 70 CE. There is no doubt that when they crossed the Jordan, looked back, and saw the city in flames—they wept. As we read in Psalm 137,

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the banks. For those that carried us away as prisoners asked us to; but all we could respond was “How shall we sing God’s song in a strange land?”

They wept for the loss of the city and people. They wept for the loss of life—but perhaps, I like to think, they wept for more. They did not cry for the material possessions that were lost, the wealth and communities, fields and vineyards, because there would always be fields and vineyards. Nevertheless, as our rabbis teach us—our people wept because they remembered the holiness of Zion. For this they wept, for the spiritual joy which was lost to us.

During the second week of March, when the city of New York began to shut down I remember packing up my bag, and bringing a few books and papers with me. Many of us remember those early days of March as being uneasy and uncomfortable—the reality was starting to set in that we were being asked to isolate not only from our families and friends—but also from the center of spiritual joy for so many of us—our congregation. And though the building remained at 7 West 83rd street and that eternal light never dimmed—nonetheless we were exiled.

Lately I have started to think that the real marvel of Judaism is the religion and people’s ability to be resilient and flexible in the face of great adversity. In the ancient world when twice the temple and Jerusalem fell—twice it meant the possible end of Judaism then and there. Thankfully, it was not the end, and in fact, the Judaism that survived each destruction is stronger and more resilient than the one before. There is a moving moment from the book of Jeremiah found in the Haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah that describes the Israelites streaming out of Jerusalem after it is destroyed: “thus said the Eternal: A cry is heard in Ramah—Wailing, bitter weeping. Rachel [is]

weeping for her children. And there is hope for your future for your children shall return to their country.” Hope is what we know as a people, and that sense of yearning that exists within every Jewish soul is what keeps us moving forward—embracing change instead of standing against it.

Now, I’m by no means an expert, but as a young college student, I learned a theory of evolution known as “punctuated equilibrium”—the theory posits that most species exist in an extended period of stasis, which may be punctuated by sudden shifts leading to radical change. Now, if we ZOOM out (pun intended), and take a look at the evolution of Jewish life over the many thousands of years of history, we see extended periods of stasis, and sudden upheavals which have led to change and evolution. Moments in our people’s history that because of our own doing or outside forces, have pushed us to think to evolve and to change—while still holding on to the core ideals of Jewish life.

I would like to suggest that today we are in just such a period of evolution—forced to change and adapt and move forward. What do we need to do? First, we need to rethink what it means to belong to the Jewish community. We need to no longer view the value of membership to a place or a space as the only reason why we join synagogues. We need to understand that we belong to Jewish communities not only because we want our seat in the Sanctuary, or because of our rabbi’s kindness, but because we want to invest in the idea that without our financial investment Jewish communities might not exist in 50 years. And we want the Jewish community to exist. Each congregation is another beacon and light in this world where people can be shown not only what Jewish teachings can bring to their world—but also what the world needs from the Jewish community. To use a Wall Street metaphor, it’s great to invest in the market when it’s bullish—but it’s more important to invest when it’s bearish. The investment we are making right now, and the commitment we make right now, is going to pay us back tenfold when we can guarantee a Jewish future for our children and our grandchildren—when we have a place for them to go to when it’s safe.

Second, we must be willing to answer this question: “If you’re not able to come into our sacred space, how can you make your space sacred?” Just like our ancestors have been forced to answer this question many times—we too are being asked to keep our Judaism in our homes, distant from the comfort of our building. Vanessa Harper, our Rabbinic Intern, has created a [beautiful document](#) with many ideas and rituals that each of us can use to create sacred space wherever we are. You can find this on our website and I want to encourage everyone to take advantage of it. We have to shift

our view of the building and the space here as the only place where Jewish life can exist. Though I certainly want to emphasize the importance and role of synagogue spaces, I believe that if there is one thing these last few months have shown us, it's that we are more than that—we are Rodeph Sholom whether or not we are in a building—we are a community because we know that Rodeph Sholom is with us no matter where we go.

Two thousand years ago, the fall of our temple was a turning point in the Jewish condition. As a people we needed to redefine what “home” meant to us. We no longer had a physical touchstone, we were scattered to the wind, but we still had a core that we could cling to. We still had our Torah, our beliefs, and our values. We made Judaism portable, making wherever we lived a *Mikdash Me'at*—what the prophet Ezekiel coined a “small sanctuary.” We learned that we are more than the worst thing that could happen to us. We learned that when we are lost, we can tap into the *Mikdash Me'at*, that portable sanctuary that we have created.

I'm so proud of what we as a congregation have done these last few months—I hope you are too. We took a 180-year-old brick-and-mortar institution and turned it into a vibrant and thriving online congregation. What we have done as a community is shown that it's not just about the building that makes us Rodeph Sholom—it is our willingness to stand up in the face of adversity and say to each other that we will not just survive, but thrive.

Unfortunately, the reality is that this will not be the case everywhere. The Jewish world is going to look a bit different in the next twenty years. I personally can see that there will be fewer and fewer small-town congregations and more larger institutions as people are able to Zoom in and connect virtually through the power of technology. Congregations that embrace this changing landscape and reality, and double down on the virtual communities and the ways that it can reach a wide breadth of people will survive—and flourish. It is interesting to imagine a Jewish world where you can feel connected to a place or a clergy member or a teacher, even though you may never have met or visited with them, but realize you are able to connect with them on a deep spiritual level.

As we have seen, a Rabbi can show up in your home from 3,000 miles away. Technology has allowed us to survive—the Jewish community must embrace it. And because of it, we can reach new heights and blossom. In terms of the methods of education and learning: it is time to embrace a

virtual *Beit Midrash*—or a virtual house of learning. The ideal is to be able to study and pray together, but when that is not an option we must evolve.

Finally, a third point: All of us will need to change the way we engage in Jewish life. We are at a very sensitive point right now in Jewish history. We need to balance the necessary transformation of our institutions with the hunger that we all feel to regain and re-enter our sacred spaces, with our need to educate our children, and with the importance of face-to-face experiences in our sanctuary. If we have learned anything from our prophets it is that we must yearn for and hope for a return to our home. In the meantime, the future of Jewish life is going to be a fine balance between a virtual reality that reaches into our homes and our screens, and the yearning to return to a tradition of standing side by side in our sanctuary—safely.

Each year we open up our *machzor* and know that the way forward is through *t'filah, tzedakah, u'tesuvah*—we pray, we embrace justice, and we will change. That is the heartbeat of the Jewish people—and now, more than ever—we are being asked to change. What are each of us going to do? Are we going to embrace it or are we going to fight it? We all need to come together as one to guarantee that at this moment—we will stand up just like our ancestors did after they wept on the banks of Babylon—and had the strength to say: we will continue.

May this year be a year of strength and renewal for each of us and our city. May this year be a year when we see the challenges that lay ahead of us and view them as opportunities to change and to grow. May this year be the year when we, as one community, one Congregation Rodeph Sholom, just as past generations of Jews have been forced to do, stand together and say we will continue and we will be here—no matter what.

Shanah Tovah.