

What Lies Beneath

13 years ago, Elie Wiesel shared these words with the world:

“In the final analysis, I believe in man in spite of men. I still believe in his or her future in spite of what human beings have done to the principle of human dignity and human life. I believe in language, although it has been distorted, corrupted, and poisoned...I still cling to words, for it is we who decide whether they become spears or balm, carriers of bigotry or vehicles of understanding, whether they are used to curse or to heal, whether they are here to cause shame or to give comfort.”¹

Ours is a tradition that relishes the inversion of the expected. Light is created out of its opposite, the underdog overthrows established power in nearly every tale of siblinghood and national conflict; the Messiah is said to be born on Tisha B’Av, the most somber of days in the Jewish calendar year,² and the lowliest of thieves may become the greatest of sages.³ Yom Kippur, this day of death and mortality, judgement and confession, is intended to be the most joyous day of the year. As Wiesel frames it, the very same vehicles of struggle may be paths of healing. It is we who determine the destiny of action.

This summer, the world finally noticed the rapidly receding waters of Lake Mead. For 40 years, scientists warned of the concerning trends of the Colorado river and the risks of catastrophic drought should the river run dry⁴. While the waning water levels of Lake Mead have been noted for years, the arrival of treasure hunters and forensics teams lifted the tide of global awareness. WWII relics and the grizzly remains of murders emerged into the light of day, and with them our fascination to learn the stories of all that lies beneath. What once was hidden comes into the light of awareness, with all its wonder and all its horror.

In Judaism, receding waters are a symbol of hope. For a tradition that envisions rain as blessing and water as a symbol of wisdom, it is fascinating to see the retraction of water as our vision of hope. From the emerging peak of Mount Ararat after the biblical flood to the emerging path of redemption through the Sea of Reeds, our sacred text imagines possibility is forever present, it is just often hidden from the eyes. Receding waters reveal what was there all along. By inverting what is expected, we come to see one of the most powerful truths in our individual and collective lives: only out of struggle do we feel called to reach for redemption.

In the midst of the Exodus story, our early rabbis imagined the Israelites needed a rallying cry for redemption. They believed the bones of their ancestor Joseph were buried beneath the Nile River. And when the time came for the nation to gather and unite, the waters moved to let Joseph’s bones

¹ Elie Wiesel, [Days of Remembrance remarks](#), April 23, 2009

² Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 2:4; Lamentations Rabbah 1:51

³ Reish Lakish, see Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 84a

⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-07-15/scientists-have-long-warned-of-a-colorado-river-crisis>

rise to the surface. Seeing this symbol of their ancestral legacy, the Israelites gathered Joseph's remains and rallied towards redemption.

At Lake Mead, the rapid recession of water portends the climate crisis before us. But there is more beneath the surface of this story. The human remains that now rise to awareness are enabling families to find closure with their missing loved ones. Those exploring the expanded shores of the lake discover history from a century ago that now dazzles scholars. With public attention and awareness growing, officials from all 7 states along the Colorado river are meeting for the first time in nearly a century looking to collectively shape a strategy of action. From horror may come closure, and from crisis may rise a unifying path of purpose.

The metaphor of receding waters is one we can apply to nearly every sector of human experience. From economy to government, from society to personal health. To channel Warren Buffet's famous maxim, only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked. If nothing else, this is certainly a time when so much is laid bare for the world to see. Yom Kippur in particular invites us to embrace this moment of truth-telling, to relinquish the surface platitudes, to let go of the distractions and luxuries, and come to face all that lies beneath. And as we see what emerges, the question is whether we can use Jewish inversion tactics, to see the now-visible ground as our pathway to action and purpose.

So goes the well-worn synagogue joke:

A Jew is shipwrecked on a desert island. Years later, a passing ship stops to rescue him. When the captain comes ashore, the castaway thanks him and gives him a tour of the little island. He shows off his tools, his fire pit, the synagogue he built for praying in, his hammock. On their way back to the ship, however, the captain notices a second synagogue. "I don't understand," the captain asks; "why did you need to build two synagogues?" "Oh," says the Jew, "this is the synagogue I would never step foot in."

The trouble is, the humorous truth behind that joke is beginning to fade into a different era of American Jewry. Forty years ago, 70% of American Jews belonged to a synagogue. Today that number hovers at only 30%.⁵ At the same time, pride in Jewishness has bloomed to 94% across all demographics, and the American Jewish population is increasing faster than the American population as a whole. This paints a bright picture for the future of American Judaism, but a challenging one for synagogues as they have been.

We are blessed that Rodeph Sholom remains one of the most vibrant congregations in the nation, weathering the storms of COVID due to the dedication and commitment of this community. But as we see peer synagogues struggling, and others shuttering their doors around the country, we cannot ignore the larger trend of retreat from Jewish communal life. When the fastest growing demographic of religion in America are the "Nones" – not those who wear habits, but those who choose not to affiliate – we see a need to learn from our Rodeph Sholom history. As prior generations shifted the

⁵ <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-3-jewish-identity/>; The number for American Jewry as a whole currently is 31%; amongst Reform Jews the number is 34%, Conservative Jews 50%, and Orthodox Jews 69%, which indicates the urgency within the Reform world in particular.

heart of this congregation to center on the need of people, as leadership innovated to create the country's first Reform Jewish Day School and the first Jewish worship experience for neurodiverse families, we are reminded of a truth that can only be recognized when the waters recede: the purpose of these walls, the purpose of this organization, is people.

Exactly 100 years ago, the late Mordecai Kaplan founded his vision of the future of the Jewish synagogue – the Jewish Center up on 86th Street. Kaplan made this ten-story structure into "a shul with a pool and a school." At that time, he knew that the synagogue had to both create community and help integrate American Jewry into civic life. Kaplan, the father of the JCC model, saw the future of Jewish institutions to be a multi-faceted clearinghouse of culture and connection. It was meant to be a home for everything Jewish.⁶

Kaplan's vision for a synagogue as a Jewish intermediary with the broader world worked in a time when Jews couldn't afford, had no access to, or weren't interested in what secular society offered - conditions that do not exist today. In fact, if Kaplan were alive today, I believe he would demand that we once again reconstruct the central structure of Jewish life to fit the needs of American Jewry as it finds itself now, not a hundred years ago.

Thanks to the wild success of prior generations, Jewish Studies departments exist on nearly every college campus, Jewish culture is found and celebrated in mainstream media, music, and movies, and despite rising anti-Semitism, American Jews are ranked the most well-liked religion in America for 16 years running. Nearly every Jewish text written from the past 3000 years is now available online and in English translation through Sefaria.org, allowing millennia of wisdom in the palm of your hand without ever needing to travel. Remote access to worship and online spiritual communities further expand the sense that Jewishness is accessible anytime, anywhere. The receding waters of synagogue membership across the country are not the result of failure, but rather outstanding success – thanks to the efforts of the generations before us, American Jews largely feel the country as a whole is their home, feeling less the need for shelter or intermediary. But there are new needs that give new clarity of purpose to American Judaism and the synagogue institution.

The synagogue is meant to be many things. Since its inception as a Jewish home long ago, it was framed with three roles - to be a Beit Knesset - a house of gathering people into a collective; a Beit Midrash - a house of learning and growth; and a Beit T'filah - a house of prayer and sacred intention. Social bonding, education, and prayer. All things found within each and every synagogue. But what we often fail to focus on is that first Hebrew word of each of these layers - Beit. Bayit. This is meant to be a house, a home, for us all.

This is the one institution whose purpose is to be a home of belonging and ignitor of purpose. Only in a synagogue can you be part of a community whose default assumption is that everyone - young and old, single and married, dweller and seeker, people who interest you and those who really, really annoy you - all belong together. Here we cultivate the ethic of community and foster the mindset of social

⁶ <http://www.jewishcenter.org/history.html>; not to be confused with the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, which Kaplan founded in 1922 as an exploration to new approaches in bringing Judaism into modern American life.

responsibility. In our missteps, we arrive here knowing that despite our failings, we may still seek redemption. In our joy and in our heartbreak, we come here to ponder a universe in which our pain exists alongside our blessing. Here we are invited to grow, to nourish ourselves and others, and answer a world of division with the spirit of connection.

We are blessed by all that prior generations sacrificed and built for our own well-being. These very walls were built during the Great Depression. With today's recession of economy, civility, and collective perspective, we feel the pains and needs of today. And with such pains, as waters recede, we may be quick to gild the glory days or criticize modernity. But in doing so, we miss the chance to look up, to see that such receding also clarifies our purpose. It is now our turn to build the next chapter of this synagogue, as we continue the 180 year legacy of this brilliant community. One that continues to center on the needs of our people and will ensure the next generation thrives.

With gratitude to our Board of Trustees, we have spent the past two years listening to and learning from our congregation, letting hard truths rise to the surface. And we now embark on the work of building our pathway forward. In the months ahead, we will share with our community how we will continue in the legacy of our forebearers, and will invite this entire congregation to help be builders of connection.

The ground of necessity that sparked 20 German Jews on the Lower East Side to begin this grand experiment of Rodeph Sholom is the ground we now return to. These are the inversion tactics of Judaism, when the waters recede, the essence of our ancestors rises to the surface, and we may gather together with shared purpose. In the words of the poet David Whyte:

Ground is what lies beneath our feet. It is the place where we already stand; a state of recognition, the place or the circumstances to which we belong whether we wish to or not... [it is] to face the truth, no matter how difficult that truth may be; to come to ground is to begin the courageous conversation, to step into difficulty and by taking that first step, begin the movement through all difficulties, to find the support and foundation that has been beneath our feet all along: a place to step onto, a place on which to stand and a place from which to step.⁷

With all that lies beneath.

This is the place on which to stand.

This is the place from which to step.

And now, now we get to build. Together.

⁷ David Whyte, "Ground" in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*