

Anchoring Ourselves in Eternity
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Temple Micah
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Lost in Eternity

One oppressively hot, D.C. summer morning I took my three children and two of their friends to the National Museum of Natural History to see the newly revealed Fossil Hall. Along with camp groups, tourists, and other young families, our group of six lined up at a quarter to ten and crowded as much as we could under the shade of the trees surrounding the building until it opened. When we entered, the kids went right for the saber tooth cat, their heads turned upward in awe. I wandered around the room slowly and soon found myself entranced not by the remains of these massive creatures, but instead, by a timeline. Simple numbers. I stopped and thought. The earth came into being nearly five billion years ago. A billion years later, organisms appeared, or really, little tiny bugs. “Who am I?” I thought, “and what am I doing here?”

Tonight we celebrate a new year, 5780. In Washington we live in angst and speak of 2020. That morning at the museum, I was lost in zeroes. Big zeroes, like gaping holes that lead to eternity.

When we left the museum and stepped onto Constitution Avenue, surrounded by the symbols of our nation’s capitol, I still felt lost—this time in the current moment.

Lost in the Current Moment

Yuval Levin writes that we live in a “fractured republic” driven by nostalgia for “a lost era of American greatness.” “Remember America when” we think, and each of us can offer a different ending to that sentence.

How can we anchor ourselves and somehow feel a sense of control in a climate of contempt and disillusionment? Instead of holding on to righteous anger; instead filling our days chasing power and money--the golden calves of our time; instead of amusing ourselves to death; how can we strengthen our resolve? How can we see that *we*, as a Jewish community, do indeed have the means to engage the world.

Judaism is Ours

The brilliant, strong, and persuasive Bari Weiss writes, “In these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul — and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours.”

The question is how? How can we, amidst the heaviness that weighs on our shoulders, the burden of humanity and the burden of our city, build a Judaism that is generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming? In an age of anxiety and apathy--when everyone is in such a rush, like

busyness is a status symbol we strive for-- how can we find the courage to see that Judaism begins with each of us? Because it is *here* that we have control.

What we have in Judaism is a democratic religious system. There is no central agency executing full control. But there are times when I look around and see that we often abstain, stand back, like visitors in an art gallery admiring a painting from afar. We marvel at the beauty that is our liturgy and point to the brushstrokes of genius from our inherited past, but all the while, remain somewhat at a distance, looking in. We behave as if this thing we call Judaism belongs to someone else. To whom, exactly, does Judaism belong? Israel? The Israeli government? Maybe the Orthodox Union, the RA, or the ACJ? How about the ADL, the JCRC, the JCC, or HUC? Who will write our story—who or what is going to define liberal American Judaism in the 21st century?

We like to say at Temple Micah that what we're doing here is an "ongoing experiment." We tinker with this and that to ensure that we can thrive, as Americans and as Jews. And though I know that the spirit that emanates from our community is full of love, I worry over what it would take for our community to truly embody the idea that the Jewish future is in our hands.

For everyone sitting here tonight, I ask-- how can we find our voice? How can we contribute to the Jewish future, with a posture that is strong and powerful? Because if the Jewish project is to flourish--thrive--with its message of human dignity and freedom for all, we have to feel ourselves as authentic actors on the Jewish stage, ready to affirm the truths that we know are at the heart of our people's story.

We are the Creators of Our Own Lives

At the end of every service we speak the words of the prophet Zachariah: (singing) "*V'ne'emar, v'hayei adonai, l'melech...*" "And God shall be king over all the earth! And on that day, there shall be one God, one name." On that day. On that day. What did Zachariah mean when he wrote these words? When is that day?! As my children often wonder aloud in the car, "are we there yet?"

"On that day." Henry Slonimsky pondered these words in the following way.

"...maybe God and perfection are at the end and not at the beginning. For how can God be called one--that is, real, if humankind is rent asunder in misery and poverty and hate and war? When humankind has achieved its own reality and unity, it will thereby have achieved God's reality and unity. Till then God is merely an idea, an ideal... (that) subsists in the vision of a few great people's hearts, and exists only in part, and is slowly being translated into reality."

Translation--on *that* day humanity will fully blossom, but today, in this world, God is an aspiration we seek to live up to, *which means we are in charge*. Whether or not perfection is made real depends on us. What we do with exile is ours to decide.

The Rabbis tell a story of a traveler who happens upon a burning castle. “Is it possible that this castle has no ruler?” the traveler wonders, at which point, magically, the ruler reveals himself. “I am here,” says the ruler. Today, we see the world in flames, but despite our inquiries as to who’s in charge, we know all too well that “the playwright is apparently dead and cannot be consulted as to his original intention.” So be it. Let this be an invitation to pick up our inherited, tattered script and edit ferociously. Only we are the masters in this burning world. The roadmap for our future will be written by you and me.

How?

In other words, how do we fill our days? As we sing and dream about “that day,” what do we do in the meantime, that is, *now*, in this life, today? How do we actively, with pride, contribute to the Jewish future? Because the Jewish future is not only about us, it’s also about our dear country, and, of course, the Human Project.

Buber and Spiritual Resistance

In Germany in 1933, Martin Buber lost his professorship at the University of Frankfurt because he was Jewish. His wife, Paula, was harassed by local police, because she was Jewish. His granddaughter, Barbara, was ostracized at school, because she was Jewish.

Buber, in response--at least in ‘33--didn’t try to leave for America or Israel. Instead, he spoke of “spiritual resistance” through action, specifically, through Jewish learning. Yes, Jewish learning.

“The need demands deeds,” he said. “It is not enough simply to sow the seeds, which perhaps will yield in the distant future their fruit. Today the need is urgent. And today the means of help must be found.”

Buber created a Center for Jewish Adult Education. Study. Period. The Jews will fortify themselves for living, he said, through Jewish learning. In his words:

“The concept of ‘Jewish adult education’ might have been understood even a short time ago to mean... ‘cultural values’ that were to be passed on to those growing up... to initiate those not familiar with Jewish subjects into some general knowledge of this community.” But, Buber argued, “the issue is no longer equipment with knowledge but mobilization for existence. Persons... are to be formed... who will... uphold some substance of life; who will have ... moral strength and so will be able to pass on moral strength to others; persons who live in such a way that the spark will not die. What we seek to do through the educating of individuals is the building of a community that will stand firm, that will prevail, that will preserve the spark.”

No one can truly understand what we’re all doing here. There’s no one final answer to the question of all those zeroes. And, despite the ways in which we might try to fight or ignore it, we all know how this ends, for all of us. And so we come here, now and again, to open up these books and to consider our parents and our parents’ parents. To feel anchored in something real. Something Eternal. We come to speak these brilliant, sticky sentences. “We were

strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Choose life.” “Love your neighbor.” These powerful sentences we’ve carried from country to country *mean something*. As so we return year after year to speak them, and to feel a sense of grounding in this vast universe—a sense of order amidst the growing chaos of our world.

On these days of awe and introspection, we bring hope to life as we engage in the Jewish conversation. To be a Jew--to embody the prophet Zachariah, who could somehow envision a reality of unity and love, even amidst chaos and despair--is to know that when we speak about the potential of God, *we are really speaking about our own potential*. To be a Jew is to know that where there is darkness, we mobilize for existence.

Just think of the darkness we’ve seen-- and here we are-- assembled together by the hundreds and thousands, *all around the globe*.

Assembled—

Assembled to anchor ourselves in the drama we’ve chosen to call sacred; to dream of a life in which we thrive and others around us thrive and help to bring that dream to life.

We are here-- to fortify ourselves on the solid foundation that is the Jewish past, present, and future.

But most of all, we assemble tonight to say, *hayom harat olam*, today the world is pregnant with possibility. And as we speak these words, we remind ourselves to live in such a way that the spark will not die, even amidst the storm, even if we are mere specks, lost amidst the zeroes of a billion.